



Beyond Access: Rethinking the Gap in Quality Education for Tribal Communities in Manipur

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Abstract: Education is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of social equity and economic development. While India has made substantial strides in expanding educational access, tribal communities in Manipur continue to face multilayered barriers that compromise the quality and inclusivity of education. These challenges encompass poor infrastructure, inadequate teacher recruitment, linguistic mismatches, socio-cultural alienation, and persistent economic marginalization. Though the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 outlines reforms for an inclusive and equitable education system, implementation in tribal regions like Manipur remains uneven. This paper critically evaluates the state of education among tribal communities in Manipur, examines the gaps in policy delivery, and offers recommendations for contextually appropriate interventions rooted in cultural relevance and community engagement.

Keywords: *Quality Education, Educational Disparities, Tribal Communities, Manipur, NEP 2020, Inclusive Education, Equitable Education.*

1. Introduction

Education serves as a powerful vehicle for human development and social justice. However, for many tribal communities in India—and particularly in the Northeastern state of Manipur—this transformative potential remains largely unrealized. Structural inequalities rooted in colonial histories, economic exclusion, and political marginalisation continue to obstruct the path to equitable educational outcomes. Scholars such as Govinda and

Bandyopadhyay (2010) and Jha and Shah (2012) emphasize that these disadvantages are not just about access but about the chronic neglect of quality and relevance in tribal education.

While NEP 2020 attempts to address some of these long-standing issues by promoting localised, inclusive, and flexible educational frameworks, its impact in tribal belts like Manipur is yet to be comprehensively evaluated. This paper seeks to bridge this research gap by unpacking the systemic issues affecting tribal education in Manipur and providing evidence-based suggestions for transformative change.

1.2 The State of Tribal Education in Manipur

Manipur is home to over 30 tribal communities, with major tribal groups such as Nagas and Kukis many of whom reside in remote hill districts. According to the Census of India (2011), Scheduled Tribes comprise approximately 40% of the state's population. Despite increased enrolment levels due to policies like the Right to Education Act (2009), challenges related to quality, continuity, and cultural inclusivity persist (Ramachandran, 2009; NIEPA, 2020).

Infrastructural deficits are widespread ranging from dilapidated school buildings and absence of electricity to lack of drinking water, libraries, toilets, and digital facilities. The NIEPA (2020) report highlights that many tribal schools in the Northeast operate under substandard conditions, directly impeding students' learning outcomes.

Adding to this is the chronic shortage of trained teachers. Kumar and Devi (2019) and Mehta (2015) have documented the high pupil-teacher ratios and the absence of subject-specialist educators in tribal belts. Harsh terrains, poor road connectivity, and insufficient incentives deter qualified teachers from serving in these areas. This shortage is particularly severe in secondary education, where science and mathematics teachers are often unavailable.

1.3 Linguistic and Cultural Barriers

Language remains one of the most overlooked yet critical issues in tribal education. Most schools in Manipur follow instruction in English or Meitei (Manipuri), sidelining indigenous tribal languages spoken at home. Mohanty (2017), UNESCO (2019), and Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh (2012) underscore the importance of mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in enhancing comprehension, self-esteem, and academic success.

Empirical evidence also suggests that children taught in their home languages during early years perform better in both language acquisition and core subjects (Panda & Mohanty, 2009; UNESCO, 2016). Yet, in Manipur, neither curriculum development in tribal languages

nor teacher training in indigenous dialects has been systematically prioritised. This results in cognitive alienation and contributes to high dropout rates among tribal students.

1.4 Government Interventions and Policy Measures

The Government of India has initiated several schemes to support tribal education. The Right to Education Act (2009) provides a legal guarantee of free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, intended to improve attendance and nutritional outcomes, has had positive effects in some areas but suffers from inconsistent implementation in remote tribal regions (Jha & Shah, 2012). Tribal scholarships are also offered to reduce economic barriers; however, these are frequently hindered by bureaucratic delays, which disrupt the academic continuity of marginalised students (Ministry of Education, 2022).

The Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) were envisioned to deliver quality education in tribal areas. While their design is promising, their actual reach remains limited in Manipur's hill districts, where physical inaccessibility and administrative gaps prevent widespread impact (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023). Furthermore, De and Mehendale (2010) highlight the lack of community involvement and oversight in the implementation of such schemes, which often leads to disconnection between policy intention and local needs.

1.5 Implications of NEP 2020 for Tribal Education

The National Education Policy 2020 provides an ambitious blueprint for reforming India's education system. Among its most promising features for tribal communities are its emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy, encouragement of mother-tongue instruction until at least Grade 5, development of Special Education Zones (SEZs) in underrepresented regions, and integration of vocational education and flexible learning pathways.

These strategies have the potential to transform tribal education by addressing linguistic, economic, and geographical disadvantages. However, scholars like Bora and Singh (2021) and Ramachandran and Naorem (2013) caution that such benefits remain contingent on effective policy implementation. For instance, while the NEP encourages digital and online learning to supplement traditional education, large portions of rural and tribal Manipur continue to lack reliable access to electricity and the internet, making the policy's digital push largely aspirational rather than practical.

1.6 Challenges in Policy Implementation

Although NEP 2020 appears progressive on paper, its translation into practice exposes persistent gaps. One of the most glaring omissions is the absence of a clear strategy for developing textbooks in tribal languages or recruiting bilingual teachers to facilitate multilingual education (Mohanty, 2017; NCST, 2018). This not only undermines pedagogical effectiveness but also marginalises indigenous knowledge systems and cultural identities.

Financial support mechanisms, such as tribal scholarships, are often plagued by bureaucratic inefficiencies and delays, leading to frustration and increased dropout rates among tribal students (Ministry of Education, 2022; Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). While the NEP's inclusion of Special Education Zones signals a recognition of regional disparity, it remains unclear how these zones will be funded, staffed, or evaluated.

The push for digital education, if not accompanied by infrastructure development and localised capacity-building, risks deepening the educational divide rather than narrowing it (Tilak, 2009). Similarly, while residential schooling models like EMRS have improved access in certain regions, scholars such as Xaxa (2018) argue that these institutions risk cultural dislocation and alienation if they do not incorporate tribal heritage, language, and values into the school environment.

2. Conclusion

Improving the quality of tribal education in Manipur requires more than just access—it demands culturally respectful, structurally robust, and context-sensitive interventions. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 offers a visionary framework, its effective implementation must adopt a multi-layered approach in addressing systemic economic barriers, inadequate infrastructure, the need for linguistic inclusivity and engaging local communities in educational planning and monitoring. Policies must empower tribal communities to actively participate in educational planning, while innovations such as mother-tongue pedagogy and localized curriculum development must be adequately resourced and sustained. The future of tribal education in Manipur depends on how well national policies are translated into grassroots realities.

The journey toward inclusive and equitable education for Manipur's tribal communities must transcend the narrow metric of access and instead focus on deeper dimensions of quality and relevance. Although the NEP 2020 presents an opportunity for transformative change, its success in tribal regions hinges on context-sensitive implementation, strong infrastructure

investment, and meaningful community involvement. Only through such holistic and inclusive strategies can the constitutional promise of education as a fundamental right be fully realized for the tribal communities of Manipur.

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