

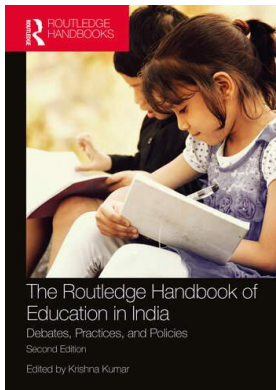
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## **The Routledge Handbook of Education in India Debates, Practices, and Policies**

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### **Tribes and higher education in India**

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# Tribes and higher education in India

*Virginus Xaxa*

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On the eve of Independence, what marked the situation of tribals in India were poor economic conditions, social backwardness, and geographical and physical isolation. Such a state of being was attributed to their overall isolation from the larger Indian society. However, even in instances where this geographical and physical isolation was broken through roads, railways, and other means of communications, the economic and social condition of tribes hadn't changed for the better. Rather, it had become worse. With the improvement in means of communication, the general scenario was the movement of people from the plains, especially traders and moneylenders to begin with, and later land-hungry peasants, to tribal areas. With this began the process of dispossession of tribes from their lands through force, fraud, forgery but more importantly, usury. This alienation of land from tribes to non-tribes, widespread in the early phase of colonial rule, continued all through the colonial period. Alongside, there was another kind of dispossession. This had to do with the denial of rights over access to forest and forest resources that the tribes had traditionally exercised and enjoyed for generations. The forest, along with its land, was the life support system of the tribal population. These new developments had far-reaching implications – economic, social, and cultural – for tribal societies. Tribes, on the eve of Independence, were thus marked by physical and social isolation, on the one hand, and massive exploitation on the other due to their contact with the outside population.

The scenario noted above led to heated debates on the policy to be adopted towards tribes preceding India's Independence in 1947. The debate was led by Verrier Elwin and G.S. Ghurye. The former made a plea for their isolation, citing things that had happened to tribes following their contact with the outside world. The latter, on the other hand, attributed the overall social and economic backwardness of tribes to their geographical and social isolation which, he argued, needed to be overcome by their assimilation into the larger Indian society (Elwin 1943; Ghurye 1943). These two lines of thought found an echo among others. While the former had the support of the colonial administrators, the latter found resonance among nationalist leaders and social workers.

In fact, at the time of the Constituent Assembly's deliberation on the policy for tribes, the nationalist leadership was fully aware of its dual lines of debate as well as the situation prevailing in tribal India. Strangely still, neither of the two lines seemed to have fully convinced the leaders, who nowhere made any clear statements as to what the policy was. In fact, if one were to take

the Constitution and the provisions laid down therein for tribes, it would be clear that post-Independence India has adopted neither a policy of isolation nor of assimilation towards them. The provisions for tribes in the Constitution take what may be termed as the middle path. And these are broadly of three types. The first are the provisions for protection, especially against their dispossession from land, which is evident in the fifth and sixth Schedule of the Constitution. The second are the provisions for safeguarding of their language and culture. This is what the policy of isolation envisaged by Elwin aimed at protecting, among many others. The third set of provisions guarantee reservation for them in state employment and higher educational institutions and development aimed at improving their economic and social conditions. These provisions in the Constitution were oriented to ensure access to employment as well as improvement of their socio-economic status as espoused by the policy of assimilation articulated by Ghurye.

### Underlying policy and higher education

The policy of reservation has been identified as one of the most important institutional mechanisms for addressing the aspects of social isolation or exclusion, thereby initiating the integration of tribes with the larger Indian society. State employment and politics are the two sites where reservation has been identified as key to the process of integration. But reservation in state employment, unlike reservation in the sphere of politics, is conditional, as it is contingent on a level of educational attainment. For employment of certain kinds, mere school education of a certain level is necessary. However, there are employments that require qualification above high/higher secondary education. But even the movement to higher education is not automatic, dependent as it is on attainment of prerequisites – namely, the minimum qualification without which admission to a higher educational institution is not possible. Within school education, mobility to higher classes until the introduction of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act) was contingent on attainment of educational achievement in the form of passing the preceding classes. Hence, education of a certain level and kind is much more important today than education per se. Much of the employment available today either in the public or private sector requires qualification that goes beyond school level, underscoring the importance of higher education. In addition to qualification, a certain level of competence too is almost mandatory.

Modern education in India was introduced under the British, and so was higher education. Since then, both school and higher education have witnessed manifold expansion, especially in the post-Independence phase of the national reconstruction process. And yet the position of higher education in India is still far from adequate, not only in terms of number, but, more importantly, in quality. The existing higher educational institutions have scarce resources and hence entry to higher education is competitive. The greater the reputation of the institution, the fiercer the competition. For those who compete for entry into higher educational institutions, though in principle they are treated as equals in terms of the opportunities for entry, the ground reality is far different. The level of the playing field for the competitors varies greatly on account of disadvantages such as colour, ethnicity, status, class, sex, etc. The Indian Constitution has taken cognisance of this and has tried to address the problem with special provisions in the form of what is generally termed as ‘protective discrimination’. Thus in higher educational institutions there is reservation of seats for the most deprived and disadvantaged – the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs). There is also relaxation in qualification for their entry to higher educational institutions. In addition, financial support in the form of scholarship, book grants, and others facilities is extended to students from this section of society.

## Modern education and tribes

The tribal society did not have the tradition of reading and writing. Knowledge and values were passed from one generation to another orally. It was the Christian missionaries who introduced reading and writing skills among them. The educational institutions introduced by the Christian missionaries cannot be understood independent of their agenda and objectives. They were historically tied to the larger objective of evangelisation, which has now almost become autonomous. Thus, with the coming of the Christian missionaries a distinct and specialised institution emerged in tribal society, which took upon itself the role of imparting knowledge, values, and skills that were alien to them. It was directed primarily towards change and transformation in society. Its emergence to a certain degree undermined the place of the traditional institution but did not replace it. Thus both the traditional institution as well as the one introduced by the Christian missionaries existed side by side. One was oriented to change and the other to maintaining traditional social order, giving rise to much stress and strain in society.

This being the case, the missions did not generally go for education beyond primary- or at best middle-school level. The missionary agenda was just to equip tribes enough to read and write so that they could read and understand religious texts. If there was ever any student who was keen to move beyond this, such a case was rare; he had no alternative but to go to far-away towns/cities/hill stations where such institutions were available. Often the converts that the missionaries found bright were sent to higher schools elsewhere so that on their return they could be used to aid the work of the missions. Tribal students going for higher education was rare but not altogether absent.

Paradoxically enough, though the colonial government extracted enormous revenue by exploiting resources in the tribal region and exacting taxes of various kinds, it did little to improve their lives through extension of modern education and health services. It was left to the Christian missionaries to do this work. The educational institutions introduced by the Christian missions initially touched upon only some tribal pockets and tribes. Gradually, their work spread to other parts and tribes, and that is how more and more tribes and regions came under the influence of the missionary activity. A sizeable section of tribes today are Christians. While Christian presence in some tribes and regions is substantial and visible, a large chunk notably remain outside this religious fold. In Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Manipur, for example, Christians form the dominant segment of the tribal population, elsewhere in the region, they are present though are not as visible. This has also been the case in other parts of tribal India. However, even with respect to these regions, it is in some tribes and pockets that they are relatively more visible than the others.

Hence, on the eve of Independence, tribes and tribal regions outside the sphere of missionary activity still had no exposure to reading and writing. This began only after India's Independence. And in post-Independence India, the situation has changed significantly due to the role of the state – not discounting the significant role of the Christian missions and other non-governmental organisations that have joined the venture. If one were to look at the status of the tribal population today, one would find the tribes and regions under the Christian mission influence better placed on social development indicators, literacy being the most notable among them.

## Higher education and tribes

As noted earlier, entry into higher education is contingent on a level of educational attainment. And although literacy is linked to higher education, mere literacy is not sufficient for entry into higher education. There are people who are literate but may not have even completed primary

education – a large chunk fall within this definition. Others have either completed primary, middle, high, or higher-secondary education. The last is the minimum requirement for entry into higher education. As one moves from one level of education to another, the total number keeps falling. This is a trend for all categories of social groups, but the fall in size is the largest in the case of tribes. The lower the literacy rate, the lower the chance for entry into higher education and vice versa. This has been true in the case of tribes as well. In 1961, tribal literacy was a mere 8.54 per cent. It saw a steady rise through the decades and stood at 47.10 per cent in 2001. With a rise in literacy, the number of students obtaining higher education has also seen a steady increase. However, in comparison with other social categories, enrolment is still low – not so much due to literacy as to the level of educational attainment. Tribal literacy share keeps declining as they move from one level of education to another, and tends to become minuscule by the time they reach secondary-level education. This has to do with dropouts, the most serious problem confronting school education among tribes today. Dropout happens to be a common problem facing all categories of school students. However, it is extremely severe among tribes, who have very high dropout rates – 57.36 per cent in Classes I–V, 72.80 per cent in Classes I–VIII, and 82.96 per cent in Classes I–X during 1998–99. Also, the gap between the general population and tribes was found to be widening from 13.67 per cent in 1990–91 to 15.52 per cent in 1998–99 at the secondary level (Government of India 2007). Hence, though eligible candidates for higher education have increased in recent years, the enrolment of tribes into it is still low and the gap vis-à-vis other social groups is still large. According to the higher education statistics for 2010–11, ST enrolment in higher education stood at 1.209 million out of a total of 27.5 million, of which 0.689 million were male and 0.52 million were female.

This constituted a mere 4.39 per cent of the total tribal population in the country. However, at 11.21 per cent the tribal gross enrolment ratio (GER) was relatively better in comparison to the 19.41 per cent GER of all social categories (Government of India 2013).<sup>1</sup> This was a marked improvement on the 1.43 per cent GER of 1991 for the tribes as compared to 2.4 per cent for the SCs and 4.72 per cent for other social categories. The corresponding figure was 3.13 per cent for STs, 4.78 per cent for SCs, and 7.81 per cent for others in 2000, and 7.33, 9.18, and 12.24 per cent in 2006 (Rout 2014: 110).

Reference was made earlier of high dropout rates among tribes as they move from one level of education to another. This is more evident in girls than boys, indicating a male gender preference. However, girls who have moved to a higher level of school education have been performing better than boys and moving to higher educational institutions. In fact, in terms of eligibility they fare better than boys in higher educational institutions more so at the postgraduate level. The percentage of girls passing out from Class XII is relatively higher compared to their male counterparts for all social groups, including tribes. However, their transition to Class XIII falls abysmally both in proportion to their pass percentage as well in comparison to their male counterparts except in the case of ST girls, where it is beyond 100 per cent (Rout 2014: 106). But even this exceptional pattern of the tribes has now taken a turn similar to the other social categories (Rout 2014: 107). At state levels, it is similar to the all-India pattern. For example, in the high-school pass results the percentage of girls was 38.1 per cent as compared to 40.1 per cent for boys in Chhattisgarh, 84.2 per cent as compared to 85.4 per cent for boys in Jharkhand, and 43.4 per cent as compared to 54.6 per cent for boys in West Bengal. At the higher secondary-school level, it was 70.27 per cent against 67.50 per cent for boys in Chhattisgarh, 68.82 per cent against 60.08 per cent for boys in Jharkhand, and 66.89 per cent against 62.30 per cent for boys in West Bengal. It was 85.66 per cent against 79.34 per cent for boys in Madhya Pradesh and 48.69 per cent against 48.79 per cent for boys in Orissa (Birua 2012: 10). Thus, though girls have a higher pass percentage than boys, their enrolment in higher education is lower in

comparison, showing prejudices against them even in the tribal society. As per higher education statistics 2010–11, the share of tribal girls in higher education was 4.32 per cent as compared to 4.45 per cent for boys. This was most evident in the GER. Tribal GER in higher education was 11.21 per cent, but the share of males and females were 12.95 per cent and 9.52 per cent respectively. However, once this initial bias has been overcome, the share of women going for higher education was better than that of men. This is evident if one takes looks at postgraduate education.

The studies on enrolment in higher education point out that once the threshold of higher education has been crossed, the entry of tribes to higher education in respect of enrolment is not very different from other social categories. The question is whether this equal chance of going to college is due to equality of opportunity or the policy of reservation of seats in higher education, which earlier remained unfilled either due to absence of eligible candidates or other constraints. Is the bridging in the gap in enrolment between SC/ST and non-SC/ST and others due to the openness of the system and the ability of tribal students to compete, or due to provision of reservation? Of course, there is much difference across social groups in terms of their share in the total senior secondary pass. The percentage of SCs and STs is relatively low. Yet their transition to higher education is much higher compared to other social categories. In 1996, for example, the pass figures for STs, SCs, and others stood at 36.3, 40.3, and 48.6 per cent respectively, but their enrolment share in the first year of higher education was as high as 117.4, 79.1 and 66.8 per cent respectively (Rout 2014: 106).

### Higher education and unevenness in access

There is considerable regional variation among tribes and their access to higher education due to factors, such as the absence/presence of high/higher secondary schools, which in turn boost enrolment and literacy level – this being the most important. Tribes and regions with higher literacy rate have greater participation in higher education. The north-east participation in higher education in comparison to peninsular India's indicates this fairly well. In north-east India, those who aspire to higher education have no option but to go to schools run by the Christian missions in Shillong. In the tribal regions of what was once popularly known as Chhota Nagpur, aspirants either move to Ranchi or Jabalpur for higher education.

The point is that tribal regions even today suffer from lack of access to higher education. In this respect, north-east India stands as an exception, for given its size of tribal population, it has a higher density of higher educational institutions in comparison to other parts of tribal India. Almost every state in north-east India has a central university, other than those in Assam, Tripura, and Manipur, which primarily caters to the tribal population. In addition, many other higher educational institutions have arisen, offering aspirants space for different kinds of higher education. While stating so, it is important to note that there is also a relatively fair presence of candidates eligible for entry into higher education. This is linked to the relatively higher level of literacy in the region. The presence of higher educational institutions in the region in turn induces secondary school passing students to go for higher education.

The setting-up of the North-Eastern Hill University at Shillong in Meghalaya in the 1970s, with campuses in Nagaland and Mizoram, acted as a catalyst for higher education among tribes in north-east India. As it is, Shillong had been and still is the centre of educational institutions, including some of the best colleges that attract students from different parts of the region. Since the inception of North-Eastern Hill University, many new institutions have arisen in different states. For example, in Mizoram, with a population of over one million, there were as many as 22 colleges and one university in 2009–10 administered either by governments (central and state)



or private individuals. The same is true for other states of the region. This has resulted in manifold increase in the number of tribal students in higher educational institutions. In fact, unlike elsewhere in the country, they dominate the higher educational institutions in the region except in Assam, Tripura, and Manipur.

In the rest of the tribal regions, higher education is marked by an absence of infrastructure facilities and poor literacy rates and it is only since the mid-2000s that there seems to be some change taking place. The setting-up of the Indira Gandhi Tribal University at Amarkantak in Madhya Pradesh with a vision of campuses in other tribal regions has been an important initiative. Situated on the border of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, Amarkantak is inhabited by a tribal population. However, it is too short a time to ascertain the university's influence and impact. I have visited the university a couple of times and I must say that though it has lent the tribals an opportunity to gain higher education, their presence on the campus is far from visible. The university, largely, remains confined to students hailing from the vicinity and has not moved beyond this. In recent years, some more central universities have come up in some other tribal regions of peninsular India, such as the Central University of Koraput and the Central University of Gujarat. The latter, though located in Gandhinagar, has become a hub for tribal students from different parts of Gujarat. And unlike other universities in the state, they are quite visible in this one.

### **State universities and central universities**

Tribes moving to higher education may thus be located at two levels: in the state they are born in and inhabit; and in other states that they move to. Students moving to other states either enrol in central government-run institutions or private institutions, particularly run by Christian organisations. Their entry into state-run institutions in states other than their own has an inherent constraint. They are not eligible for reservation, which is meant only for tribes belonging to that state, and can enter those institutions only as general candidates. At the same time, the state-run institutions are inadequately equipped in terms of infrastructure and faculty. This is not to say there are no exceptions.

Hence a large chunk of students who have been going for higher education are concentrated in their own states. Yet their share of enrolments within higher educational institutions in those states fall far short of the size of their population, excepting some states in the north-east. This has been so mainly due to high dropout rates as students reach higher level of school education. Hence, though in principle seats are available for them in higher educational institutions because of a quota in proportion to the size of the tribal population, the intake falls short due to the unavailability of students. Further, even those who are eligible often do not go for higher education either due to poor economic conditions or the distance of higher educational institutions or a combination of both. Often this is also due to a lack of people in the community or around them who could guide, encourage, and mentor them for higher education. The state governments are hardly proactive in addressing the issue of higher education of tribes. Neither are they proactive in dissemination of information nor in disbursement of facilities such as scholarship, book grants, uniform, hostel facilities, etc. Even when these are in place, it is next to impossible to make use of them, as the process tends to be too cumbersome.

Despite the spread of higher educational institutions in regions especially the north-east, there is a wave of migration of students for higher education to other parts of India, particularly to metropolises such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Chennai. Again this is most glaring in the case of north-east India. In the 1980s, the number of tribal students at a college or university in Delhi or elsewhere was small and could be counted. This is no longer the case. Since the early 1990s, there has been an exodus of students for admission to institutions of

higher learning, especially central universities and colleges run by the central ministries, which are cosmopolitan in character (like the Delhi University and its colleges, the Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Hyderabad). There is also movement to state universities but enrolments there are relatively low. The private colleges and institutions are the other attractions, especially among those who can afford these, and this segment of the population among tribes has grown too. West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, and their adjoining areas have also seen heavy migration of tribal students to metropolises, especially Delhi, for higher education.

The rush to central institutions is for varied reasons. One that seems to stand out is the diversity they offer. They are open to students and faculties from across the country and more sensitive in complying with the reservation policy. Besides, they are also better than state institutions in terms of infrastructure facilities, reputation, and the standard of higher education. The cleavage between tribes and non-tribes (tacit and open) in various forms has been a part of the tribal situation throughout colonial India and continues to this day. The general tendency among tribes is to avoid institutions where groups/communities dominate. Most state institutions typify this, making tribal students feel uncomfortable as they are generally discriminated against, looked down upon, and treated as unwanted. It is also a fact that in state-level institutions of higher learning there is least interest in implementing reservations and other provisions of affirmative action. But then, if there are no options for the students due to a variety of constraints, which is the case with most, they do continue with these institutions. And this remains true even for central universities or institutions that disregard affirmative provisions, the Central University of Manipur being an example. The participation of tribal students here is hardly noticeable even when they form nearly 30 per cent of the total state population. At the same time, there has long been an exodus of tribal students from Manipur to other parts of India. In fact, the scale of the movement of tribal students from the north-east to metropolises is much greater compared to other tribal regions.

However, there is great regional variation in their enrolments. Tribal students from the north-east far outnumber students from other parts of India, and their movement is far beyond Delhi. Students from Jharkhand, on the other hand, are mainly confined to Delhi. This pattern is visible in university departments. However, tribal student enrolment in these universities is predominantly in social sciences. Their numbers in basic science departments and related centres are abysmally low. Hence, while tribes have been competing for space in higher educational institutions in some institutions and some disciplines, from others they are conspicuously absent perhaps due to their inability to fulfil the minimum cut-off requirement for entry into these institutions and disciplines.

### **Inter- and intra-tribe differences**

Other than region, religion is the other aspect of variation in access to higher education among tribes. Tribes today belong to different religious groupings that have a bearing on their education. That tribal Christians are far ahead in education is too obvious not only in the north-east but elsewhere too. As for other religious groups such as those who adhere to their traditional religion or to Hinduism, the picture is not very clear. What is evident, though, is that they lag far behind tribal Christians. In the case of peninsular India, the advantages that tribal Christians have gained in the course of time have brought about a divide and tension between them and tribal non-Christians, which keep surfacing in different forms.

Though tribe is treated as a category distinct from other social categories such as caste and dominant linguistic groups such as Assamese, Bengali, Oriya, etc., tribes form a very heterogeneous group in terms of their languages, population size, habitats of ecological settings,



livelihood making, and so on. Those inhabiting distant and difficult ecological settings make their living mainly by hunting, food gathering, or shifting agriculture, or a combination of one or more of them. They are generally referred to as priority tribal communities, earlier known as primitive tribal communities. These communities have poor access even to primary education and hence secondary education/higher education is beyond their reach. Most tribes having access to higher education hail from either regions close to towns or distant places with communication facilities. There are also variations in access to higher education among tribes irrespective of the region they come from. Even in the north-east, where literacy is high and more eligible candidates are available for higher education in comparison to other regions, there is much ethnic variation in the region or state itself. In the state of Meghalaya, for instance, of the three dominant tribal communities, the Khasis and Jaintias have a much stronger presence in higher education vis-à-vis the Garos. The other groups, which are numerically small, are hardly visible in higher education. This is also the case in Nagaland, Tripura, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, and Assam. The Angamis, Aos, and Lothas in Nagaland have better representation than other tribal groups. In Assam, Boros and Deoris are better placed vis-à-vis Lalungs, Rabhas, Tiwas, etc. Similar patterns can be seen in Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, and Rajasthan. In Jharkhand there are about 29 tribal groups, but the Oraons, Mundas, Santhals, Kharias, Hos, the dominant groups of the state, have fared better than the others. In Andhra Pradesh, the Lambadas; in Rajasthan, the Meenas; and in Himachal Pradesh, the Negis – these groups dominate higher education. Of course, among the major groups too there is variation. Santhals are numerically the largest group in Jharkhand, but their literacy is lower than that of the Kharias, Mundas, and the Oraons.

The answer to why north-east India has done better than other tribal regions in higher education is rooted in its history. The region had an early exposure to modern education due to a widespread presence of Christian missionaries. One of the key concerns of these missionaries was/is education, which could aid their evangelisation. Those tribes or parts that had an early exposure to Christianity had better literacy, which resulted in a relatively large number of people going for higher level school education, and some among them even for higher education outside of the region.

Those who converted to Christianity and got educated also adopted a lifestyle which was seen as different and sometimes better than that of the rest. Their entry into new occupations either within the institutions of the Christian mission as teachers, catechists, health workers, etc., or in the government as office workers, peons, attendants, and clerks gave them an added status. Thus, there came about a process of social differentiation in the tribal society, not only of beliefs but also of occupations, which began to pose a challenge to the traditional system that was based either on birth in a lineage or age. Ascription, which was earlier the source of honour and esteem, was gradually replaced by lifestyle, occupation, and status. The values and status associated with the emerging positions gained momentum as the missionary work spread to different parts of the region. Apart from the north-east, the role of the missionaries is most visible in the tribal belt of what was earlier known as Chhota Nagpur. This part of mainland India has a visible Christian population, though meagre in comparison to the tribes practising their traditional religion. These tribal Christians are also visible in schools as well as higher education, and they are conspicuous by their presence in government and other employment. This pattern is the same in other tribal regions, but in a less visible form.

The changes that followed the work of Christian missions took the form of a new aspiration in the tribal society. Tribes that embraced Christianity and became educated were driven initially by the urge to work for the spread of Christianity and aspired to join the work of Christian missionaries as clergies and pastors. They went for higher education to theological colleges

located in different parts of India and were trained in philosophy (Indian and Western) and Christian theology. After completion of their training and education, they worked and still work as pastors, teachers, administrators, etc., and in more recent years as social workers, development practitioners, and human rights activists. Such works were and are still considered as noble, and many young tribal students with good minds and talent go for education of this nature.

Gradually, other avenues of work and employment became accessible and available to educated tribals. They joined the government in various capacities, but their presence in the colonial government was tiny. Post-Independence India's policies of rapid economic and social development and affirmative action, despite various limitations, boosted higher education, as jobs of varying kinds and ranks became available to tribes. The earlier educated tribal youth, more so with higher education and employment in government or as clergies/pastors, acted as role models for others who later followed into their footsteps. It is important to note that the Christian missions place a great deal of stress on education and health. Encouragement, guidance, and at times even financial support form an integral part of their pastoral work. Such support has aided the movement of tribes to higher education.

The early exposure to reading and writing made it possible for tribes to enter new occupations in government and missionary organisations. These new opportunities attracted others, leading to the spread of Christianity and literacy, which eventually had a bearing on higher education. The difference among tribes with respect to modern education and higher education is related to this historical advantage. Tribes and tribal areas that had an early exposure to modern education have higher literacy rates, larger numbers of people with higher levels of educational attainment, and hence a higher pool of students for higher education.

Although, there is a strong association between tribal Christians and higher education, there are also cases of tribal non-Christians doing fairly well. Groups such as the Meenas in Rajasthan, Negis in Himachal Pradesh, and Lambadas in Andhra Pradesh have done fairly well without any Christian help. And even among tribes in which Christians are more visible, non-Christians have done well. This may be due to their good economic standing, but more importantly it was due to their exposure and interaction with the wider world. The drive for education may have come from the reference groups with whom they interacted on a regular basis. The presence of a community or group treated as superior often turns out to be a reference point of emulation. Tribes with such locations have somewhat better educational attainment and hence better representation in higher educational institutions, provided their economic condition is not precarious.

### **Tribes and academic programmes**

The enrolment of tribes in higher educational institutions, as has been noted earlier, has increased substantially in recent years, but it has not been uniform across disciplines. A large bulk of students enrolled in higher educational institutions are generally found in humanities and social sciences. This is followed by medicine, engineering, commerce, etc. The lowest participation has been in sciences. In the late 1970s, for example, tribes constituted 2.48 per cent of the total undergraduate students in humanities and social sciences. This was 1.82 and 1.20 per cent respectively in medicine and engineering. In sciences, it was as low as 0.83 per cent. Participation saw a further decline at the postgraduate level. While it was 1.93 per cent for humanities and social sciences, it was as low as 0.50 and 0.18 per cent respectively for medicine and engineering. Science remained at 0.79 per cent, which was almost the same as the graduate level (Xaxa 2014: 124). This pattern of participation continues to this day, except that there has been a steady increase at each level. For example, in 2000–01, the percentage share of tribes at the

undergraduate level was 5.09 per cent in BA/BA (Hons), 2.01 per cent in BSc/BSc (Hons), 1.7 per cent in BCom/BCom (Hons), and 3.54 per cent in BE/BSc (Eng)/BArch. In all these, their participation was less than the SCs and the range varied from two to eight times. The pattern remained similar at the postgraduate level. The only programme in which the tribes had a slight edge over the SCs was medicine. Their participation stood at 11.49 per cent against the 10.84 per cent of the SCs (Rout 2014: 115).

Within each of these broad disciplines, there have been variations. In the humanities, for instance, one would find them mainly in languages and rarely in subjects such as philosophy or linguistics. In the social sciences, disciplines such as economics find fewer takers. Professional streams such as medicine and engineering are employment-oriented and hence have higher participation than sciences. Of sciences, botany, agriculture, and zoology have better representation than sciences such as physics, chemistry, and mathematics. This may be so due to their interest and aptitude for those disciplines in view of their lived world in which plants and animals assume an important place.

However, in this respect one finds somewhat interesting and conflicting patterns between premier institutions or central institutions and state-run institutions or institutions in the state of their domicile. Even today, very few tribal students opt for basic sciences. And while they are visible to a small extent in institutions located in their respective regions, their absence is stark in premier/central institutions. In institutions such as JNU, Delhi University, the Central University of Hyderabad, and so on, it is almost rare to find tribal students in basic science disciplines. In contrast, they are conspicuous by their presence in social science disciplines. While there is poor participation of tribal students in basic sciences even in state institutions, the pattern is not the same with respect to professional and social science programmes. Indeed, one finds professional education having an edge over social science education in state-level institutions. There is a sort of obsession for professional courses such as engineering, medicine, and so on, at least in mainland India. This is in contrast to the north-east, where the social sciences are still popular and a large number of students still pursue them. The contrast may be illustrated better with reference to Jharkhand, where STs formed 5.0, 2.00, and 0.56 per cent respectively of the total student enrolment in BA/BA (Hons), BSc/BSc (Hons), and BCom programmes as per the educational statistics 2006–07. Against this in the BE/BSc (Eng)/BArch programmes, the share of STs was as high as 24 per cent. In medicine, dentistry, nursing, and pharmacy, the share was 22 per cent and in polytechnic 23 per cent. However, in postgraduate programmes the share of social sciences went up to 37 per cent of the total in MA, followed by 10.61 per cent in commerce and 4 per cent in science. For the other disciplines, students going for postgraduation are hardly visible (Birua 2012: 22). There are, of course, strong biases against social science education in mainland states, which has afflicted the tribes as well. There is a general feeling among the educated, including tribes, that social sciences have no scope for employment and are only for students who are poorly endowed. Hence, with poor performance there is a strong tendency for professional education. As noted above, this is not the case in north-east India.

### Academic performance

Once they have entered higher educational institutions, the lives of tribal students are far from smooth, both in academic and non-academic terms. Although institutions provide hostels prescribed under government policy, these facilities fall far short of the requirement, and a large chunk of students are forced to stay in rented accommodation or as paying guests. Those who find the costs of these unaffordable decide to withdraw from the institutions and go back to their homes to look for other opportunities.

The academic performance of students belonging to tribal communities has been on the whole inadequate, though there are exceptions. Over the years, I have observed and interacted with many tribal students in higher educational institutions and have invariably been made aware of their difficulties and inadequacy in coping with the demands of higher educational institutions. This stress is more evident in institutions and departments of repute. The inadequacies of the tribal students stem from varied sources – one being English language proficiency. Though this does not pose a serious problem to students from the north-east and those from English-medium schools as a majority of them aspiring to higher education are fairly proficient in the language, the same is not true for students coming from other parts of India. But more serious than the problem of English language is tribals' inadequacy in learning – conceptualisation, comprehension, articulation, and more important their writing inability. Thus, they enter premier institutions with disadvantages that, while some are gradually able to overcome, others find difficult to cope with. The baggage of disadvantages is invariably linked to the nature and type of institutions that they come from. During my 23 years at the Delhi School of Economics, I rarely found a tribal student in the Department of Economics. Those who did make it dropped out in the course of time. In other departments of the school, especially sociology, they were present in substantial numbers, but their overall performance was comparatively dissatisfactory. This was evident in their rates of failure, repetition of courses, and relative marks/grades. This dimension of higher education has received wide attention in the context of technological institutions such as the IITs in view of the large-scale failure of SC/ST students.

To conclude, the participation of tribes in higher education has increased manifold. Yet enrolments remain the lowest and the gap between tribes and other social categories continues. Academic performance remains an issue of serious concern, whatever the discipline. At the root of it lies the disadvantages with which tribal students join the higher education programme. This has largely to do with the schools they come from, which suffer from lack of quality education on various counts. The disparities among tribes that exist across regions, ethnicities, sizes of population, levels of development, and geographical/ecological settings with regard to their participation in higher education therefore are in need of urgent attention.

## Note

- 1 Gross enrolment ratio (GER) provides a viable estimate of participation in higher education of various social groups by taking their enrolment in proportion to their population for higher education.

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