

Addressing the Barriers to Early Education of Tribal Children in Remote Locations



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ABOUT

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In December 2021, the Ministry of Science and Technology, Department of Science and Technology (Policy Research Programme) made an open call for the submission of Expressions of Interest in STI Policy Research towards the Establishment of the Center for Policy Research (CPR) by the academic and research Institutes In India. After multiple rounds of consultations and review, the DST-CPR at NISER received the final sanction order from the Government of India, Ministry of Science & Technology, Department of Science & Technology, bearing the letter No DST/PRC/CPR/NISERBhubaneswar-2023 (G)(PCPM) dated 29/03/2023.

The primary focus of the DST-CPR at NISER is to study the Energy Transition and the secondary focus is to study the Tribal Education, and Innovations for Tribal Education in Eastern India covering Odisha, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and West Bengal.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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Executive Summary

This policy brief provides actionable policy recommendations to address the challenges of early education in tribal hamlets in remote locations. Based on a comprehensive review of literature and field experiences, it provides the current situation of tribal education, challenges faced by tribal children, and ongoing government initiatives in improving tribal education. Following the provisions of the NEP 2020, we make two recommendations to improve the early education of tribal children in remote locations. a) Anganwadi centers can be merged with the primary schools if both operate within a one-km radius. (b) If primary schools are far from the Anganwadi centers, the latter should be strengthened to provide education up to class two. Most of the tribal hamlets in remote locations face the second scenario. We recommend that all Anganwadi or mini Anganwadi centers in tribal hamlets be upgraded to class two if a primary school is unavailable within a one-km radius. The Anganwadi teachers from the same hamlet should be trained to teach up to class two in their mother tongue.

Addressing the Barriers to Early Education of Tribal Children in Remote Locations

1. Introduction

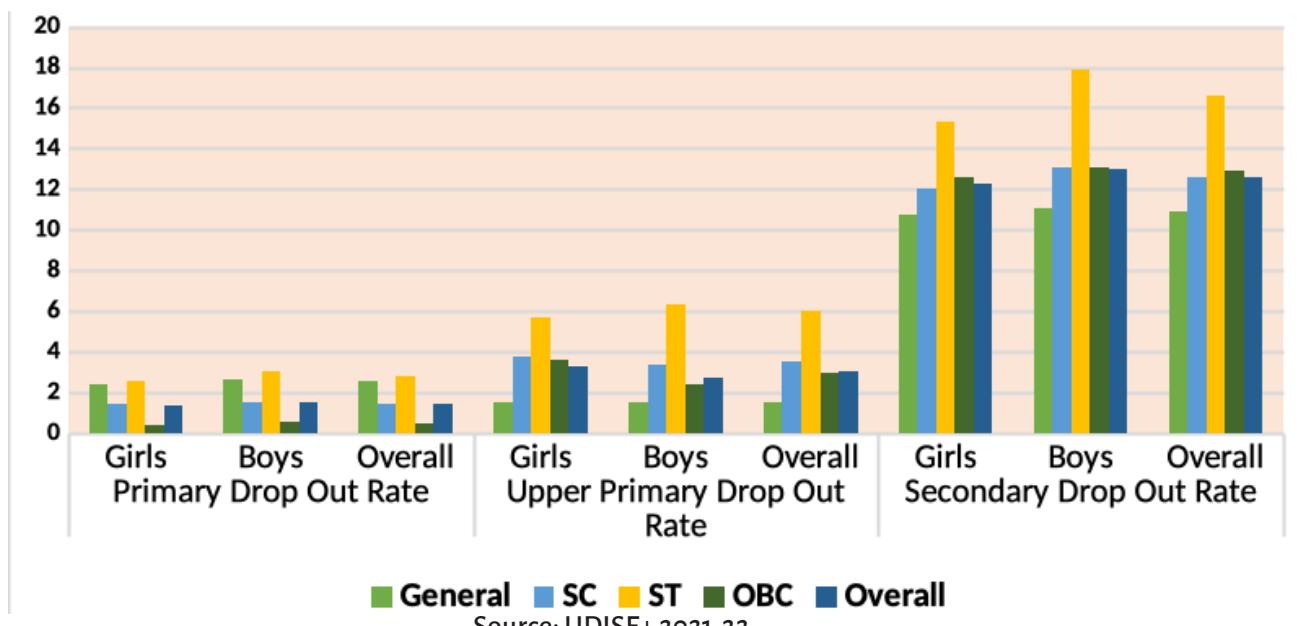
“Education is a fundamental human right and the bedrock of societies, economies, and every person’s potential.”

-Antonio Guterres (UN Secretary-General)

India's diverse tapestry is woven with numerous tribal communities, each with a unique cultural heritage, traditions, and languages. One-third of the world's tribal and indigenous population, over 104 million tribal people, live in India (8.6%). Spread across 705 communities, they represent unique cultural diversity. Out of the total Schedule Tribe population, approximately 2.6 million (2.5%) belong to "Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups" (PVTGs) known as the "Primitive Tribes." There are 75 identified PVTGs spread across 18 States and Union Territories in India. There are 90 districts or 809 blocks with more than 50% tribal population, accounting for 45 percent of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population (GOI, n.d.; Kumar et al., 2020). While these indigenous communities have endured for centuries, they often find themselves on the fringes of the formal education system. The historical context, marked by colonialism and post-independence developments, has resulted in geographic isolation, economic deprivation, and language barriers that hinder access to quality education for tribal children. This policy brief aims to explore the intricate and multifaceted issue of tribal education in India. We focus on the children's challenges in small hamlets in remote locations to get early stages of education.

In India, the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986, while not explicitly focused solely on tribal education, did include provisions and guidelines to address the educational needs and concerns of tribal communities in India. The NPE, 1986, recognized the importance of providing quality education to all sections of society, including marginalized and underprivileged groups such as tribal populations (GOI, NPE, 1986). Nevertheless, according to the 2001 census, 75 percent of children were out of class, which influenced the government to implement different policies and programs for compulsory education for all social categories of children. Special incentive schemes such as the Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) (GoI, PoA, 1992), the Midday Meal Program (NPNS & MCC, 1995), and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA, 2002) were launched. Education became a right after the 86th constitutional amendment, making primary education a fundamental right for children aged 6 to 14. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, popularly referred to as the Right to Education Act (RTE Act, 2009), came into effect on April 1, 2010. Despite all these provisions, according to the 2011 census, the gross literacy rate in India is 73 percent, while the tribal literacy rate is 59 percent, where male literacy is 68.5 percent and female is 49.4 percent. The dropout rate is also high among the scheduled tribes (figure 1). The overall dropout rate among tribes is 25.48 percent; at the secondary level, the dropout rate is 16.62 percent (UDISE, 2021-22). Similarly, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is lower among scheduled tribes than other social groups in India.

Figure 1: Dropout rate based on gender and social groups



2. Barriers to Tribal Education

It is essential to understand the problem of tribal education and the challenges of achieving the goal of inclusive education. Tribal education faces many complex challenges that often stem from historical, social, and economic factors. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach. Here are some of the critical issues highlighted:

2.1 Limited Access to Education

Access to quality education is a fundamental right, yet in many tribal areas, this right remains elusive. Geographic isolation often renders these regions inaccessible, characterised by rugged terrains, dense forests, and a lack of proper transportation facilities. As a result, children in tribal communities overcome formidable barriers to reach a school. The long distance discourages many from attending school, especially during extreme weather or monsoon seasons (Bindhani, 2021). Particularly for girls, schools situated beyond 2-3 km from their natives become a significant hindrance in accessing secondary and higher education (Das and Das, 2021). Distance to school is a significant roadblock: 44.1 per cent of primary schools have a total enrolment of 60 or less, but the situation is different in the case of upper primary (UP) schools. Only 11.5 per cent of UP schools have a total enrolment of 60 or less (ASER, 2022).

2.2 Cultural Alienation

The cultural disconnect between mainstream education and tribal communities is another critical dimension of the challenge (Viswanath & Mohanty, 2019). The curriculum, textbooks, and teaching methods employed in mainstream schools often do not reflect the unique cultural context of tribal communities. Educational materials may not reflect the cultural context of tribal communities, making it difficult for students to relate to the content. This disconnect can result in a lack of engagement among tribal students, who might find it difficult to relate to the taught content. The decline of native languages within tribal communities threatens cultural identity and makes it challenging for students to connect with their heritage through education.

2.3 Socio-Economic Disparities

Poverty, another longstanding issue, further exacerbates the educational divide among tribals. In a study conducted in the Sundargarh district of Odisha, only 5 percent of the population studied had attended tertiary education (Dundung & Pattnaik, 2020). The economic hardships tribal families face compel their children to contribute to family livelihoods from a young age. The prospect of going to school often takes a backseat when immediate survival and sustenance are at stake. It is a tragic situation where the very struggle for survival deprives these children of their right to get an education.

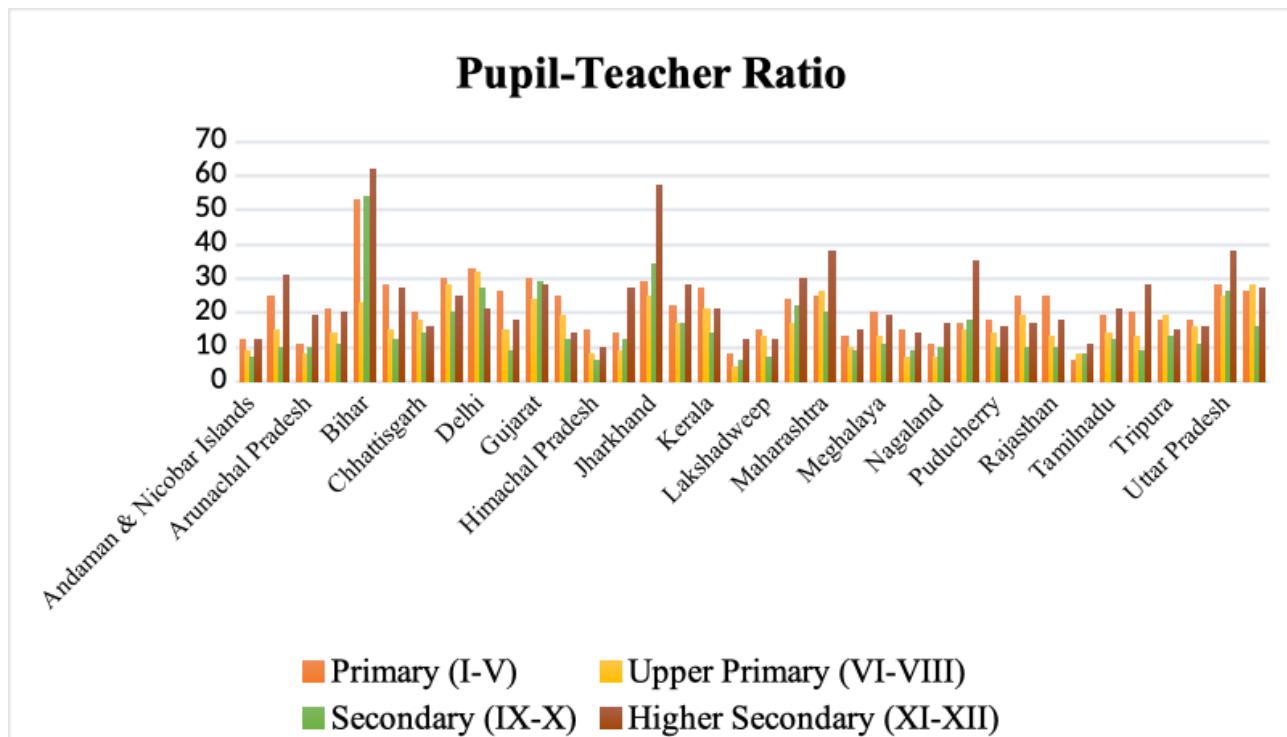
2.4 Language as a Barrier

Language is a vital bridge to the world of education, yet in many tribal communities, it becomes an intractable obstacle (Kujur, 2019; Sahu, 2014; Punnaiah, 2018). These communities often speak their own languages or dialects, vastly different from the official languages of instruction in schools. The language barrier impedes the learning process and hinders effective communication between teachers and students, leading to increasing dropout rates from school.

2.5 Pupil-Teacher Ratio

The scarcity of qualified teachers in tribal areas hinders quality education (Das, 2007). Some areas suffer from a dearth of trained educators, while in others, teachers may not be adequately prepared to understand and address the specific needs of tribal students. In many cases, this shortage leads to overcrowded classrooms and a lack of individualized attention. Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal report a high Pupil-Teacher Ratio compared to other states. The Ratio deteriorates further at a higher secondary level ([figure 2](#)).

Figure 2: Pupil-Teacher Ratio



Source: UDISE+ 2021-22

2.6 Lack of Infrastructure

Basic infrastructure, such as clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, and functional classrooms, remains a significant concern in many tribal schools. The absence of these essentials can make the learning environment inhospitable and unsafe for students. According to the Annual Status of Education Report (2023), 23.9 percent of schools still need toilet facilities or facilities available but are not usable. Similarly, the proportion of schools with unavailable or unusable drinking water facilities is 23.9 percent (ASER, 2022). A study conducted by Roy, Mandal, and Khasnabis (2023) pointed out that tribal blocks in the states of Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Andhra Pradesh were more deprived than non-tribal blocks in terms of infrastructure and performance.

3. Government Initiatives: Progress and Challenges

Recognizing the gravity of the situation, the Indian government has undertaken various initiatives over the years to bridge the educational gap among tribal children. These initiatives encompass a wide range of policies and programs designed to address the unique challenges faced by these communities. Notable efforts include:

3.1 Special Schools for Tribal Children

Establishing special schools like Ashram Schools, Ekalavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya in tribal-dominated areas is a crucial initiative to address the challenges of geographic isolation and language barriers. Ashram schools play an essential role in increasing the rate of literacy among ST children. Over the past few years, a shortage of teachers in ashram schools has become a big issue (Devajana, 2023). Another issue is that most of the teachers working in ashram schools are not from tribal backgrounds, and they are not positioned to understand the unique social and cultural issues of the tribals. After elementary education at ashram

schools, tribal children go to the Ekalavya model residential school to continue their education (Chattopadhyay et al., 2009). According to the Annual Report (2022-23) of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 689 EMRS were sanctioned; of them, 401 are currently functional.

3.2 Scholarship Programs

The government offers scholarships and financial incentives to encourage tribal children to attend school regularly and complete their education, such as pre-matric and post-matric scholarships for ST students, National Fellowship for ST students by the University Grants Commission for pursuing higher education by providing financial assistance for research and doctoral studies, free coaching for ST students to enhance their competitive capabilities. These programs aim to mitigate economic hardships and motivate tribal families to prioritize education.

The major challenge among tribal children and their parents is the lack of awareness about welfare schemes available for their betterment in the education sector (Gangele, 2019).

3.3 Bilingual and Multilingual Education

The National Curriculum Framework 2005 was made to guide institutions and schools in encouraging the overall development of children and the move away from textbook-centric learning. It emphasizes the importance of imparting primary education in the child's mother tongue. The 2022 National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stages (NCF-FS) under the National Education Policy 2020 recommends that the mother tongue be the primary instruction medium for children until eight years of age. Several states like Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan have implemented bilingual or multilingual education programs using tribal languages alongside the official languages of instruction. In the state of Odisha, ten tribal languages such as Santali, Saura, Koya, Kui, Kubi, Kishan, Oram, Munda, Juanga, and Bonda, were adopted at the first phase for the medium of instruction at the primary level. In 2013-14, 11 more tribal languages were included. This approach has proven effective in making education more comprehensible and engaging for tribal children (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, n.d.). Significant challenges of multilingual education for ST children are the unavailability and inadequacy of trained MLE teachers in

the tribal schools, most of the MLE teachers are first-generation learners, gaps in home and school language, inappropriate pedagogy for MLE education (Dash & Mishra, 2019).

3.4 Teacher Training Programs

Teacher training programs are conducted to equip educators with the skills and knowledge required to work effectively in tribal areas. 'NISHTHA' is an integrated teacher training program to equip teachers to improve the quality of school education. More than 60 percent of teachers in tribal areas are non-tribal teachers (Mishra, 2018). They have a different view about tribal people and culture. The question is: Does the teacher training module contain tribal education as the particular focus? These programs should emphasize understanding the unique needs and culture of tribal communities.

While these government initiatives represent significant progress, numerous challenges persist. Shortages of qualified teachers in tribal areas, inadequate infrastructure, and cultural disconnect between the formal education system and tribal communities continue to hinder fully realizing these programs' potential.

4. Challenges to Education in Tribal hamlets in Remote Locations

Many tribal hamlets are located inside forests and inaccessible areas, making establishing and maintaining educational infrastructure difficult. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, there are 1,17,064 (data available) tribal villages in India where the scheduled tribe population is more than 25 percent. Of them, around 39,513 villages do not have all-weather roads, and 34,999 do not have a mode of public transport. Of the 1,09,888 electrified villages, 7,868 only have 1-4 hours of electricity availability. Of the 1,17,064 tribal villages, only 3,453 have a primary health center, 7,114 have a community health center, and 18,185 have a health sub-center, while a total of 88,295 villages have no access to health care (Kukreti, 2019). A total of 172643 primary schools, 54743 primary schools with Upper primary, and 4673 primary schools with Upper primary, secondary, and higher secondary schools are functional in 177 tribal districts in India (MoTA, 2018). Distance to the nearest school and lack of proper roads and transportation impede students' regular attendance and school access (Das and Das, 2021).

Due to being located inside the forest, tribal hamlets are not connected to all-weather roads and lack all basic amenities. Insufficient or poorly maintained school buildings, lack of electricity, and inadequate sanitation facilities hinder the learning environment of tribal children. Moreover, due to the small size of the hamlets and the presence of few school-going children, the government is unwilling to open schools in remote locations. Instead, tribal children are asked to join the nearest tribal residential schools. Neither are children at six years of age in a position to stay away from their parents nor do the parents show interest in leaving their wards in far-off schools. Non-enrolment of tribal children immediately after the transition from Anganwadi Centres severely impairs the learning of tribal children.

5. The New Education Policy, 2020

The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced by the national government in 2020, outlines a comprehensive framework for reforming the education system in India. While it does not explicitly target tribal education, the NEP 2020 has several provisions and objectives that can positively impact the education of tribal children and communities. The policy promotes a flexible and multidisciplinary approach to education, which can help adapt the curriculum and teaching methods to the specific needs and cultural context of tribal communities. The NEP also encourages the use of a multilingual education. This is particularly significant for tribal areas where children often speak their languages or dialects. Besides these, the National Scholarship Portal is a part of the NEP 2020, which can offer financial incentives and scholarships to tribal students, making education more accessible and affordable.

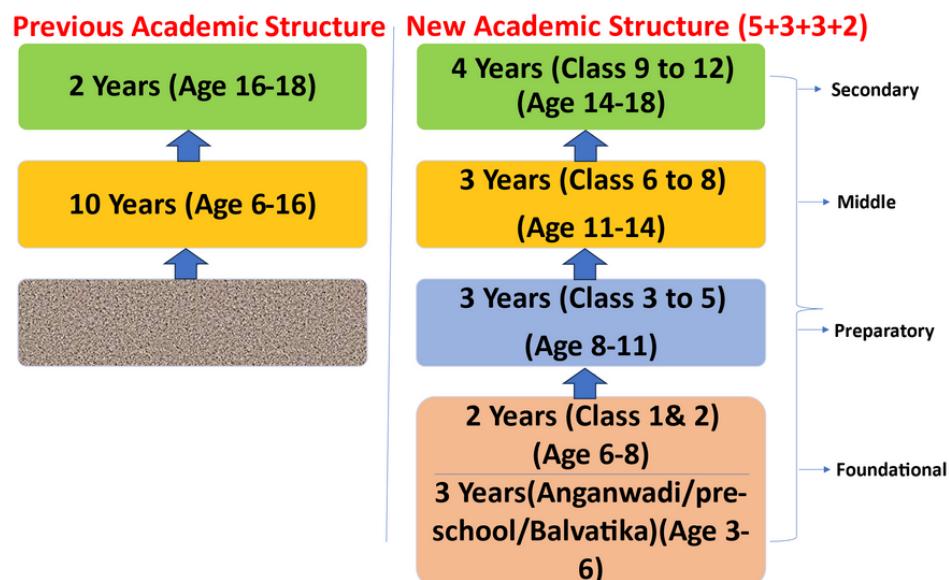
While the policy acknowledges the need for improved infrastructure, addressing these gaps in tribal areas remains challenging. Many tribal schools lack basic amenities, and infrastructure development is often hampered by geographical and logistical challenges (ASER, 2022; GOI, 2022). The policy does not explicitly address the preservation and integration of tribal languages and knowledge systems. It is crucial to ensure that tribal culture and heritage are recognized and preserved within the educational framework. While the NEP emphasizes inclusive education, it is essential to ensure that the curriculum and teaching methods are culturally sensitive to the unique needs and perspectives of tribal children. The cultural disconnect remains a significant challenge to be addressed. Despite the policy's focus on equity, ensuring access to quality

education remains challenging. In many tribal areas, schools lack adequate resources and quality teaching staff.

5.1 Restructuring of Early Education

The NEP recommends the implementation of the 5+3+3+2 structure, which involves changes in pedagogical approaches and curriculum development (figure 3). The structure is designed to correspond to the different developmental stages of children and aligns with international best practices. The structure is divided into four stages, starting from the foundational stage, which spans over five years and covers ages 3 to 8. The foundational stage has two parts: a) Anganwadi /Preschool (3-6 years), which focuses on play-based and activity-based learning; b) Classes 1 & 2 (6-8 years), which continue with play-based learning but induce more formal pedagogical methods, with emphasis on developing language and numeracy skills. The second stage is the preparatory stage (classes 3 to 5), which continues for three years and covers ages 8 to 11. In the preparatory stage, the teaching will be done through the play-way method, discovery, interactive and activity-oriented classroom teaching. The middle stage is the third stage (classes 6-8), in which the children explore a more comprehensive and multidisciplinary curriculum. The greater focus will be experimental learning in sciences, mathematics, social sciences, and humanities. The last stage is the secondary stage (classes 9 to 12), which comprises four years and covers the ages 14-18. In this stage, students can choose subjects based on their interests and career aspirations. Critical thinking and skill development of the students will be more emphasised.

Figure 3: Transforming Curricular and Pedagogical Structure, NEP, 2020



Source: UDISE+ 2021-22

A merged system can facilitate a smoother transition for children from Anganwadi to primary education, minimizing disruptions and ensuring continuity in their learning experiences. It can optimize the use of resources, including infrastructure, materials, and personnel, to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. Integrating Anganwadi centers and primary schools (up to class 2) at the hamlet or village level can align with national education policies and goals. By merging two systems in a single window, tribal children will not find education as irrelevant and foreign culturally and academically. In tribal hamlets and villages, involving the local community can be crucial for the success of integration efforts.

5.2 Strengthening the Anganwadi Centres at the tribal hamlet/village level

We recommend two scenarios for the merger of Anganwadi Centres with primary/elementary schools. Wherever primary schools are not available within a radius of one kilometer, Anganwadi centers/mini Anganwadi centers should be strengthened with all infrastructures to provide education up to class two. Thus, Children can avail of all foundational education from three to eight years in their village. Most of the Anganwadi teachers are from the same village. Therefore, tribal children can get an early stage of education in their mother tongue from their community. After eight years, these children can be enrolled in residential schools for higher levels of education.

13.89 lakh AWCs/mini AWCs are operational in India (Ministry of Women and Child Development, GOI, 2022).

Strengthening Anganwadi centers (AWCs) for tribal education involves implementing targeted strategies to enhance the quality of early childhood education and related services in tribal areas. As Anganwadi centers at the hamlet/village level play a crucial role in providing holistic development opportunities for children under six years old, efforts to strengthen them for tribal education should consider the specific cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic context of tribal communities. Children will not be estranged from their culture, parents, or community by establishing and strengthening AWCs/mini AWCs at the hamlet and village level. The active participation of parents and tribal community members in the education process can be encouraged so that children from tribal communities would not feel estranged from their own cultures and communities. Anganwadi workers should be provided specialized training on effective teaching methods for tribal children, including understanding their learning styles and needs. Besides Anganwadi workers, teachers should be appointed from the tribal communities with proper training as the NEP emphasizes community participation in the planning and implementing educational programs. The curriculum should be developed to incorporate local languages, traditions, and customs into the educational materials.

The second scenario for the merger of Anganwadi Centres with primary schools will be much simpler. Wherever Anganwadi Centres and primary schools are located within a one-kilometer radius, both can be merged to use the space and resources effectively.

6. Policy Recommendations

Addressing the educational gaps among tribal children in India requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. It is not a challenge that can be resolved with a singular solution but rather a mosaic of interventions and policies. The following recommendations aim to strengthen the existing efforts and navigate the path towards a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape:

- Localized Curriculum Development:
 - Develop curricula that reflect the cultural context and knowledge systems of tribal communities.
 - Ensure that tribal leaders and educators from these communities are actively involved in the curriculum design process.
- Enhanced Teacher Training:
 - Expand teacher training programs to focus on understanding and respecting the cultural diversity of tribal communities.
 - Recruit and retain qualified teachers in tribal areas through incentives and support.

- Improved Infrastructure:
 - Prioritize the construction and maintenance of school infrastructure in tribal areas, ensuring that schools have clean drinking water and sanitation facilities.
 - Make schools safe and accessible, even in remote regions.
- Community Engagement:
 - Promote community participation in the education of tribal children. Actively involve parents, tribal leaders, and local authorities in educational initiatives.
 - Encourage tribal communities to take ownership of these initiatives.
- Language Sensitivity:
 - Support bilingual and multilingual education programs to bridge the language barrier.
 - Provide learning materials in tribal languages or dialects alongside the official language of instruction.

- Tribal Language and Knowledge Preservation:
 - The NEP 2020 does not explicitly address the preservation and integration of tribal languages and knowledge systems. It is crucial to ensure that tribal culture and heritage are recognized and preserved within the educational framework.
- Resource Provision:
 - Collaborate with NGOs and civil society organizations to ensure the provision of textbooks, school supplies, and uniforms. This helps alleviate the financial burden on tribal families and makes education more accessible.
- Awareness Campaigns:
 - Launch awareness campaigns targeting tribal communities, highlighting the importance of education.
- Showcase success stories of tribal individuals who have overcome educational barriers, demonstrating the transformative power of education.
- Vocational Training and Livelihood Support:
 - Extend vocational training and livelihood support programs for tribal youth. These programs should be culturally sensitive and tailored to local communities' needs and opportunities.
- Monitoring and Evaluation:
 - Implement a robust monitoring and evaluation system to track the effectiveness of policies and interventions.
 - Regularly assess educational outcomes and adapt strategies based on evidence and feedback.

7. Conclusion

Tribal children in small hamlets in remote locations face unique challenges to avail education. This requires unique solutions with a flexible approach. Based on the literature survey and field observations, we recommend strengthening the Anganwadi Centres in all tribal hamlets in remote locations to complete the foundational education. After completing eight years of foundational education, children from small hamlets can join the nearest residential schools for higher levels.

The existing Anganwadi teachers can be trained to teach the children of their community in their mother tongue up to class two. The existing Infrastructure of the Anganwadi centers needs to be strengthened to accommodate more children. Similarly, all essential amenities should be available in the foundational learning centers.

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