

Reflection on Key Elements and Challenges of Tribes of Kerala in Higher Education: Role of Community and Gender

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In the present modern world, education is one of the crucial necessities for survival, i.e., it helps one become part of the advancing world (Common Worlds Research Collective, 2020). In that sense, education is about the way in which human beings live their lives in the contemporary period. It helps one to make a better understanding of the diverse objects and events he comes across in his life (OECD netFWD, 2019). Simultaneously, it is more than an individual activity and is becoming a social (Gwyer & Hack, 2012), political (Mantel, 2009), economic (Ozturk, 2001) and cultural (Rachmadtullah & Kusmaharti, 2018) process too (Taranenko, Rusetskiy, Yanova, Okorokova, & Aygumov, 2019). Along with an individual's self-empowerment, education enables socio-economic development as well as cultural progress and political awareness too. Thus, approaching and designing educational activities is one of the most critical and decisive actions to deal with.

Education is a lifelong process of acquiring new knowledge and skills through both formal and informal resources (Blossfeld & Maurice, 2011). In general, education is about gathering and experiencing diverse information on habits, skills, and concepts and processing it for one's requirements through the diverse mediums of teaching, training, or research. It is typically defined as the systematic and formal transmission of generally accumulated skills, knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, and norms to an individual with the goal of equipping him for a better living (Crook & McCulloch, 2008). Increasing quality of the different layers of this educational process, its constructive and definite impacts on development, both at the micro and macro levels, are assured (Chankseliani, Qoraboyev, & Gimranova, 2021).

At its most basic level, development refers to the progress or advancement of an individual. A person is expected to acquire competence in social, economic, cultural, political, occupational, emotional, and physical skills along with physical growth. Such straits enable one to address any challenges in life. As a result, he strives for personal autonomy by making

independent decisions, cultivating interpersonal relationships, and gradually establishing a personal identity in life. On the other side, at the macro level, every collective entity like a market, an economy, a society, a state, and a country also aspires to grow and develop gradually. The diversity in their beliefs, customs, conventions, or ideologies does not prevent them from aspiring to development. However, without the ability to gather and process information into knowledge in accordance with the requirements, the development process will not be continuous or consistent. In that context, education becomes a very decisive factor. Education, from the basic pre-primary level to research and lifelong learning, plays a significant role in driving development at every level and enabling the foreseeing of possible impacts (European Parliament, 2016).

Among the different layers of education, historically, it has been the institutions of higher education that prepare students to advance levels of knowledge through research (American Council on Education, 1949). The institutions of higher education are expected to design as well as equip graduates with the knowledge, expertise, ability, competence, and moral responsibility to comply with the requirements of the forthcoming labour force (Spellings Commission, 2006). Those who have achieved success in higher education can participate and compete in the emerging global economy with more expertise (Chan, 2016). As the future of the economy and society becomes more uncertain, higher education enhances individuals' core competencies and dispositions (Tilak, 2008). When an individual is moulded with the ability of logical thinking, the capacity to challenge the status quo, efficiency in transparent communication, proficiency in problem solving, and the competency to develop sophisticated talents, he can access the global labour market even if its competitiveness is rapidly rising (Selingo, 2013). As a result, higher education guarantees lower levels of unemployment and poverty even within the home economy as it is associated with higher earnings (Kezar, 2004). Individuals' concern for personnel health will grow in tandem with their educational attainment (Brennan, Durazzi, & Sene, 2013). In addition, they will cater more to diverse kinds of public services too (Chan, 2016). Therefore, it is meaningful to articulate that higher education results in social progress and political consciousness which contribute to both individual and national development.

Social progress is the continuous and consistent improvement in the value system and collective attitude of the community concerned that enables betterment in the living conditions of people in any society. An educated one will have better qualities of observation, analysis, understanding, and judgement (Hill, Hoffman, & Rex, 2005). Hence, he can make better

assessments about individuals and events. That is, education allows one to evaluate situations based on the amount of information he is exposed to. Gradually, he will accept what is better suited to him than what has been used so far. When education results in a relatively faster mode of exposure to new information, it guarantees social progress as well (Neamtu & Burac, 2015).¹ Higher education is simultaneously doing three things. Firstly, it shapes knowledge. Secondly, it transmits knowledge for practical purposes, and thirdly, it makes the students and general population adaptable to rapid social changes due to changes in every other realm. Through this complex process, diverse kinds of inequalities and discriminations were addressed and erased from every society in the past. The movements against those existing injustices are still going everywhere. Every scientific breakthrough, every new technology, every political shift, and every natural disaster have their own economic consequences, resulting in social unrest. Economic changes and social unrest are inter-connected (Barrett & Chen, 2021). Social movements were formed to address social unrests using the knowledge and wisdom gained and sharpened through higher education. When civic skills are enhanced through higher education, the citizens will meaningfully participate in the affairs of civil society and political life. They will be aware of their social needs, social duties, and responsibilities, which will contribute to the advancement of society. It will also help to eradicate the social evils that exist in society through the diffusion of society. On the other side, it will promote national values like equality and social justice (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009).

As higher education is about reflecting on everything that happens around it in the form of theories, models, and theses, it makes learners aware of the hidden but prominent forms of political activities and agencies. Gradually, it develops political consciousness in them. Such an attitude creates critical and radical movements against discrimination, injustice, inequalities, intolerance, and hatred. Institutions of higher learning like universities and research centres are the catalysts of progressive and profound revolutionary movements in the past and present. An educated and politically exposed individual is the most creative, constructive, and innovative agent of change. The vigour and wisdom of youth in institutions are most productive when they are threatened by authorities or the system. Political awareness enables students to be alert to any policy announcement, legal process, administrative reform, or similar event. They not only

¹ The University Commission of 1948-49 observed universities as “Everything is being brought to the test of reason, venerable theologies, ancient political institutions, time- honoured social arrangements, a thousand things which a generation ago looked as fixed as the hills. If India is to confront the confusion of our time, she must turn for guidance, not to those who are lost in the mere exigencies of the passing hour, but to her men of letters, and men of science, to her poets and artists, to her discoverors and inventors. These intellectual pioneers of civilization are to be found and trained in the universities, which are the sanctuaries of the inner life of the nation”.

interfere with issues but also communicate with other affected people. They are better at articulation and argumentation. Sometimes universities force introspection at the policy and administrative levels too. The higher education system always creates politically alert learners (Abrahams & Brooks, 2019). They will be aware of their political rights, democratic duties, the importance of political values, the mechanisms of political processes, and the gaps in society's political apparatus. Such comprehension and consciousness will address all types of socio-economic movements in society.

Another significant aim of higher education is the autonomous development of the individual. An individual is the architect of his own destiny, and higher education will cater to the complete development of the individual. This will also facilitate good employment opportunities with good wages, thereby improving their standard of living as well. It helps in the overall development of an individual—physical, intellectual, moral, social, aesthetic, and spiritual. It allows the individual to be a productive member of society, thereby being an asset to it. It develops skills, improves health, and brings out the built-in potentialities hidden in human beings.

As mentioned above, higher education results in general national development through political, social, and individual development. That is, by rediscovering itself in the midst of emerging conditions of transforming economy and society, higher education will equip the country to grow even faster in tandem with global economic progress (Cloete, Maassen, & Pillay, 2017). Hence, universities play a transformative role in any society (Tremonte & Storen, 2013). As globalisation calls for rapid industrialization and transformation into cutting-edge technologies even at the micro level, the nation can manage the circumstances only through the massification of higher education (Bridges & McLaughlin, 2012). In simple words, higher education is a catalyst for growth, prosperity, and competitiveness in national and global economics (McLaughlin, 2012). It will enable individuals, i.e., citizens, to maximise their potential by cultivating their interests, attitudes, and moral and intellectual values, which can then be applied to innovations and technological advancements that benefit the larger economy by driving local and global investment, increasing exports, and making the economy more balanced (Leliugiene & Barsauskiene, 2012).

Scheduled Tribes in Kerala:

Like elsewhere, each tribal community in Kerala has its own unique culture, beliefs, livelihood strategies, social organization, economy and developmental perspective (Babu, 2013). Compared to national conditions, the scheduled tribe population of Kerala has better demographic indicators

Table 1
Comparison of Demographic Indicators Between India and Kerala 2011

Indicators	India	Kerala
Percentage to Total Population	8.6	8.6
Decadal Growth Rate	23.7	33.1
Child Population to Total Population	16	11.2
Literacy Rate	58.96	75.81
Female Literacy	49.35	71.1
Male Literacy	68.53	80.76
Sex Ratio (Rural)	991	1031
Sex Ratio (Urban)	980	1070
Sex Ratio (Total)	991	1035
Infant Mortality Rate (Rural)	85	60
Infant Mortality Rate (Urban)	61	44
Infant Mortality Rate (Total)	84	60

Source: Population Census (2011) (Shabeer & Krishnan, 2017)

There are different numbers provided in literature about the number of tribal groups in Kerala like thirty-four (Shebeer, 2015), and thirty-five (Babu, 2013). But the following table gives the present accurate picture.

Table 2

Details of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala

	Name of the Tribe		Name of the Tribe
1	Adiyan	19	Maha Malasa
2	Arandan	20	Malai Ariyan
3	Eravallan	21	Malai Pandaran
4	Mala Pulayan	22	Malai Vedan
5	Irular	23	Malakkuruvan
6	Kadar	24	Malassar
7	Kammara	25	Malayan
8	Kanikar	26	Malayarayar
9	Kattunayakan	27	Mannan
10	Kochuvelan	28	Muthuvan
11	Kondakapus	29	Palleyan
12	Kondareddis	30	Palliyan
13	Koraga	31	Palliyar
14	Kota	32	Paniyan
15	Kudiya	33	Ulladan
16	Kurichian	34	Urali
17	Kurumans	35	Mavilan
18	Kurumban	36	Karimpalan

Source: Babu, 2013

Statement of the Research Problem:

The importance of education in both progressive social change and upward economic mobility is widely acknowledged. The growing socio-economic inequalities that exist, particularly in developing countries like India, which has a large tribal population, can be effectively addressed by ensuring their quality education. Among the diverse tools of development, education is considered one of the most potent and lasting agents in the long run, with the least spinoffs. Within the vast ambit of education, it is higher education that assures the advancement of professionalism and technological up-gradation of its disciples. As a result, the proportionate presence of the tribal population in higher education in relation to their population share is now regarded as both a necessary and sufficient indicator of development. Considering the fact that scheduled tribes are around one-tenth of India's total population, bringing them into the space and scope of higher education is a historical responsibility and challenge in front of us.

The present lacuna in the higher education of scheduled tribes is not because of any one single reason, but rather the amalgamated effect of several factors. As a community that has

always stayed away from the mainstream of society, not only geographically but also socially and culturally, scheduled tribes always find it difficult to understand the essence and significance of most of the methods of modern society, and education is no exception. The scheduled tribes are always struggling with several puzzles within and outside themselves while responding with education, which has always kept their pace behind others. The socio-economic conditions that determine the need for higher education are not favorable to the scheduled tribes even now.

Even now, tribal women are the community with the least support in terms of accessing and completing any higher education courses. The absence of nearby institutions as well as the poor quality of connectivity with them affect tribal women's access to higher education more than anyone else. The nature of urban middle-class socialization, which keeps those from scheduled tribes beyond a certain point, as well as prejudices held by some among the teaching and non-teaching staff, are influencing the quality of educational attainment taking place within the institution. The absence of friendly approaches within the existing educational policies, both at the central and state levels, is the most relevant hurdle in the meaningful execution of affirmative action policies in association with scheduled tribes. However, all existing policies aimed at improving the conditions and living standards of tribal people have resulted in the increased accessibility of various agents in mainstream society to tribal community areas and affairs. It holds true in the case of tribal education as well.

Objectives and Research Questions:

In light of the above observations, the objectives of the present monograph are to explore the present status of higher education among the tribal population in Kerala. Along with that, it also tries to recommend possible strategies and approaches in order to maximise the number of tribal students participating in higher education in the near future.

1. To find out the role of gender in pursuing higher education confronted by the tribal community in Kerala.
2. To find out the role of the community in practising higher education experienced by the tribal community in Kerala.

Review of related study

Meticulous review of the literature is the most significant stage of any in-depth research. A detailed review will expose the scholar to other attempts in the same area of study, problems identified, hypotheses formulated, methodologies used, and results reached. It will also help the scholar to compare data for interpretation too. If a particular research project needs

to be established, the scholar should be thorough with the existing literature. The detailed review of literature entitles the scholar to understand what has already been identified and interpreted, which helps him have a better approach to the research problem selected. In the following sections, an attempt has been made to thematically review some of the studies conducted both at the state and national levels as well as abroad. Here the scholar attempted to review all available literature about the challenges faced by Scheduled Tribes in accessing, participating in, and completing a given course in higher education in Kerala from the perspectives of community and gender. Insight from the review revealed that there were several attempts and initiatives by both the central and state governments in order to guarantee the access of masses to higher education. However, the presence of scheduled tribes is at a minimum in the sector even now. Hence, we are attempting to understand the existing barriers for them in entering, continuing, and successfully passing out of higher education institutions, and this attempt is carried out from the different perspectives of community and gender. The conceptual details of these terms are explained in detail in the following.

It is important to explain the context of each of the key terms used here. Those terms, namely community and gender, have been used with particular reference, which may not be the same as their use in general. For instance, the community is conceived as a collectivity of people with single or multiple common characteristics. They may differ in several aspects of their identity or approach towards their common goals. But the community they uphold is more pressing, considering those declared objectives here. More than anything else, the extent of their presence and involvement in realising the active participation of scheduled tribes in the higher education sector is the definitional base of what community means in the present context. In the context of scheduled tribes, the word 'community' primarily refers to the large entity of all diverse tribal groups together. At the same time, each group among the scheduled tribes also identifies as a community. Similarly, all those tribal people in a particular hamlet and particular geographical area are also referred to as a 'community' here. All of these 'communities' play a role in the accessibility and participation of students from scheduled tribes in higher education. However, the other communities also play a decisive role in this context. The understanding and approach of relevant communities like teachers, administrative personnel, policymakers, philanthropic groups, and others have a deep impact on the general life of the tribal people. Similarly, the responses of the communities mentioned above influence the availability, accessibility, and participation of scheduled tribes students in higher education.

As with community, the word 'gender' is also used in a particular manner here. But that is not that much different from the general perspective. Gender typically refers to the socially applicable norms, behaviors, expressions, identities, and roles assigned as well as associated

with each of the sexual individualities such as male, female, or others, which are constantly evolving with social, economic, political, and cultural changes occurring either in the specific context of a community or at the general level. Gender refers to the same thing here as well. But the aspect is considered from both the larger community's and individual's perspective. In general, women are considered hierarchically behind that of men. The case of tribal communities is not different. The restrictions on women mobility is a reality among tribal communities too. Permitting an adult and an unmarried female to regularly go outside their traditional geographical land is against the customs of several tribal communities. The non-tribal general public also discriminates against them in classes and other academic gatherings, usually because of the society's hidden but well-established hierarchical order, in which tribes are at the bottom. A tribal woman, in fact, is facing a kind of triple discrimination. In the first phase, it happens generally because of the marginalised status of tribals. In the second phase, those lower caste communities are discriminating against them because they are living as forest or hill people. In the third phase, they are discriminated as women too. Similarly, the young women among the scheduled tribes are very troubled about the discrimination they are facing from others while attempting to participate in higher education too. Those female students who have some exposure to the outside world have a minimum awareness of the multiple layers of discrimination they face while pursuing an academic career.

Similarly to the preceding definition, the economy here refers to a broad category of both micro and macro variables that are closely associated with, influence, or have an impact on an individual, a community, or society as a whole. In the case of an individual, the economy refers to his present economic environment, which includes his financial capabilities. It also refers to his expected economic benefits by dedicating time, energy, and other resources at present. In addition, it also points to the opportunity cost of engaging with higher education. The economy, in conjunction with the community, stands primarily for the economic consequences of pursuing higher education. They are more or less contained within the geographical ambience of their hamlet, as opposed to non-tribals. So the higher education that assists them in addressing their immediate and long-term economic issues based on agriculture, animal husbandry, forest gathering, and other activities is what determines the community's economic status to them. In the context of government, the economy refers to all supporting mechanisms that reduce the difficulties in attaining and promote the comforts of participating in higher education. So that it includes institutional facilities like accessing educational loans, scholarships, stipends, and the provision of institutions near major tribal areas and non-institutional facilities like hostels, transportation, fooding, clothing, and others.

Usually, politics refers to the governance of a state where arguments and agreements are reached about the mutually conflicting interests and intentions of diverse kinds of groups like social, economic, ethnic, political, linguistic, and others. Simultaneously, it deals with the laws, policies, regulations, judgments, and the institutional mechanisms to execute them. Diverse forms of state are the institutional format of politics, and they represent either vertical layers or parallel forms of power and interests. It is ultimately state policy that determines the nature of educational content, mode of management, sources of capital investment, provision of institutions in different geographical regions, reservation of seats, and extent of incentives to students. The foundational philosophy of the country's laws and regulations is the state policy. Any policymaking, however, will involve an uneasy process. Diverse stakeholders associated with a particular issue or sector will contest any policy that is expected to reflect the later state approach on that issue or sector. The same process will operate in the making of laws and regulations too. On some occasions, the judiciary may interfere to address the constitutional validity or conflicting elements of such laws and regulations. Usually, the creation of a new policy leads to the partial or complete creation of a matching institutional mechanism too. In the context of higher education for scheduled tribes also, all these stakeholders and their diverse interests, intentions, and influences act as a complex electrical mechanism. All these stakeholders, both individually and collectively, act on the availability, accessibility, and participation of scheduled tribes in the higher education arena. On the basis of the above definitional details, the scholar is approaching the stated objective through the different research questions given here.

1. The role of the community in practising higher education among tribal community in Kerala:

The Scheduled Tribes community is different from others, both structurally and characteristically. Their remote settlements are not the only thing that distinguishes them; their long and limited interaction with the outside world as a result of the remote settlements resulted in a community with an entirely different set of values and perspectives. Their customs, traditions, lifestyles, approach towards employment, and concept of economy are not comparable to those of the modern, civilised world. These differences are making them not only special but vulnerable as well. In a world where modern urban concepts and values determine an individual's or a community's place and status in society, the tribal community will be treated with contempt. This could even lead to a complete disregard for understanding tribal stake in all decisions affecting them. As a result, the disadvantages of being tribal may increase as time passes, which may cause the ethnic cleansing of some tribal communities. The

argument is not to leave the tribals in their own world like that of the Jarawas of the Nicobar Islands. It is about incorporating the realities of tribal communities when taking decisions about them. It is not that members of tribal communities wish to stay away from urbanised living cultures and interactions; what they demand is recognition for their social and economic culture by the outside world. The following comments of Satheesh, a member of the Kurumba community who lives in Palakkad town (in Palakkad district), reflect this without any ambiguity:

"All our forests and hills were taken by people outside. We were helpless. Your people made us poor, unemployed, homeless, and wanderers too. Now you call us uncivilised too. Without food and employment, how can we become civilised?"

Satheesh is a daily wage labourer and reached the town in his childhood days with his parents. People like him are forced to live like those in the villages and cities, and the mainstream society views it as social progress among the scheduled tribes. For members of the scheduled tribes, however, it is nothing short of an 'invasion'. Hence, understanding the tribal concepts of education and others is becoming necessary if anyone is genuinely determined to empower them. All representatives of different tribal communities who interacted agreed that learning is crucial, but except for the younger generations, they rarely used the word 'education'. This is not even a word in their vocabulary. As modern education is a mechanism to regularly supply the required labour force to modern economies, it neither meets nor recognises the chemistry of learning requirements of tribal communities. On the other side, the representatives of tribal communities do not have a mechanism in the form of modern panchayats to engage in communication with mainstream society. Scheduled tribes are not a homogenous society. The heterogeneity among them is very distinct, as different tribal communities usually stay separate from each other. The concept of pollution is very intense and sharp among them. Typically, only one tribe lives in a particular traditional tribal hamlet.

Every hamlet will have a 'Mooppan' (chieftain) who will represent it in any discussion with outsiders. The community members, especially women, will not indulge in long discussions with outsiders without the permission of their chieftains. Different chieftains of the same tribal group in different geographical areas are almost equal to each other. Only the chief priest of their traditional deity is the one who commands respect in all hamlets. This system of administration among the Scheduled Tribes is a barrier to reaching out to them too. So that the government and associated administrative agencies are trying to democratically organise them

now. One among them is 'Oorukoottam' which is envisaged as a tribal grama sabha in the form of a decentralised governing agency. It is visualised as empowering the tribal community by conducting interactions about their expectations and complaints and informing them about the various initiatives intended to support them. On the background of constitutional provisions in India, the government of Kerala has implemented Oorukoottam in the tribal hamlets to ensure the participatory role of the beneficiaries in preparing the developmental strategies for tribal empowerment in the tribal hamlets. But even such a platform cannot address the issue of higher education among them. It is because all decisions concerning educational content and college location are made only at the highest levels of government. Manju, of the Kani community in Kallar (Thiruvananthapuram district), rightly pointed it out:

"All of you are considering the Grama Sabha as a capsule to all our problems; even such meetings are held once every six months, and it has hardly had a meeting since the pandemic outbreak. Even in such meetings, political parties or elders will have their own agenda to discuss; higher education hardly becomes a topic of agenda there. At the most, we can discuss issues of transportation or concession in KSRTC."

Manju completed her graduation from Nedumangad Government College, and she elaborately explained the barriers to accessing higher education. As a day scholar, her main concern was the daily commute to and from college. After the pandemic, the number of trips reduced, which resulted in more dependency on the available buses. Similarly, she pointed out the lack of institutional arrangements to provide subsidised bus travel. Neither the panchayat nor the scheduled tribes departments stepped forward to assist them. Her words expose the hollowness of the decentralised administration we have in India too. Manju's complaint was also about the development perspectives. For them, development is all about cattle, electricity, primary health centres, roads, and other similar things. They address the immediate requirements only. But accessing and participating in higher education is about a development strategy that has long-standing advantages. It is a kind of sustainable development. All state welfare schemes will not come directly under the control of administrative units at the bottom level when state administration is decentralized. In the area of educational facilities for tribals, the grama panchayat had administrative power only over nursery schools and anganwadis. Ordinary voters can only participate in the discussion up to this level (Oorukoottam is under grama panchayat only). Block panchayats deal with issues concerning pre-metric hostels. Post-metric hostels, job-oriented training centers, and special educational sub-plans are dealt with

at the district panchayat. The rights and privileges of tribal students in higher education are not technically a point of discussion at the grama panchayat level. Hence neither grama sabha meetings or even Oorukkootams are not providing any meaningful information or assistance on higher education of tribals. Paru, who completed graduation from the Government Arts and Science College, Mananthavady (Wayanad district), and is presently teaching in a parallel college, observed that:

"The majority of tribes are unaware of the educational scholarships/grants provided by the central and state governments, owing to a lack of awareness even from Oorukoottam meetings. Only some of the tribes used the educational scholarships for the same purpose, and some of the parents used the money to support their families; additionally, many of them are drunkards."

Paru belongs to Noolppuzha (Wayanad district) and represents the Paniyar community. Even though platforms like Oorukoottam are giving the tribals a platform to raise their problems and needs, how far it is used for the development of these people is a valid question to be raised. This comment by Paru very well explains how initiatives like Oorukoottam are not reaching all tribes and families, leading to the prevailing poor educational status of their children.

Nowadays, having the right information at the right time is both a necessary and sufficient condition for gaining access to resources. As a part of the present system, it is also applicable to tribal people. What Paru complained about above also exposes the limitations of administrative mechanisms intended for tribal welfare. If the dedicated officers for tribal welfare are not aware of a particular scheme or are purposefully diverted for the benefit of one or two communities, it will affect others. The development of diverse sources of information is the most suitable option for developing accountability in such matters.

In contrast to the general situation, the desire and willingness of parents to educate their children is very crucial among tribals. Personal bonding among family members is very strong among tribals. Parents' concerns are very substantial for them. Rajesh's (Chittoor, Palakkad district) comments reflect this:

"When I was in seventh grade, my father was injured by a wild pig attack. My elder brother has joined farming since then. He was not able to manage it alone. It was expensive to employ others in our own land. As a result, my parents

decided to employ me in the field while I was in the eighth grade. I cannot disagree with them.”

Rajesh, who is nineteen, now belongs to Irular. His family owns property. He was referring to the elders' binding power over the younger members of the family. The same power is enjoyed by the community over each individual family. As a result, in order to ensure more tribal students in higher education, their parents should also be campaigned for.

In such circumstances, teachers as a community can make meaningful differences. Teachers act as a pivot in the education system. As an organised community, they have access to almost all relevant information in the field. They are also the primary role models for any student. They are the ones who will put those educational plans into action. Given tribal members' limited access to information sources, teachers can have a significant impact here. As the ones who have physical contact with students and parents, they can provide firsthand information on all educational programmes and other supporting measures for tribals from time to time. Simultaneously, they can convince both parents and students about the pertinence of higher education. However, several students shared their grievances about teachers and wardens while collecting data. Some of them, among teachers and hostel wardens, hardly provide an environment of encouragement and career advancement for these students. Teachers' attitudes and approaches, as those who regularly interact with students, are extremely important in shaping a future career for them. What Ajithan of the Paniya community in Noolppuzha (Wayanad district) said is very eye-opening.

“We face discrimination not only from other students but also from our teachers. They have a very bad attitude towards us. We are not even allowed to dream of good jobs, as they always force us to pick courses like nursing for our higher education. We feel very demotivated by the teachers.”

The above statement points to two possibilities. Either these teachers have an adverse attitude towards their subjects or they are not professionally trained in career counseling. There is a chance for both of these possibilities. Considering the hierarchical social relationships within society in general, the commonsensical notion that tribals are better suited to perform certain pre-defined careers is strongly established. Hence, tribal women are more suitable for courses like nursing, home science, hotel management (especially cooking and cleaning), fashion designing (especially tailoring, colouring etc.), and teaching, and men for the armed forces, physical education, forest management (especially watcher) and tourism (especially

escorting into forest). On the other hand, teachers and wardens may be unable to identify the most appropriate career for a student based on both his preferences and circumstances. In both cases, the casualty is the career mobility of students. The above issue became a topic during the focus group discussion conducted near Kattappana (Idukki district). Shantha, who is an upper primary level teacher and belongs to 'Mala Arayan' community, responded as follows:

"It is true that as teachers we are not able to perform according to expectations. But we too are helpless. It is hardly possible for us to perform like a teacher who belongs to the English medium. We are doing career guidance with our limited knowledge only."

Shantha's confession points out the necessity of refresher courses and professional exposure to diverse career opportunities to perform the above tasks. Even then, the attitude and approach will continue to be as 'blocking barriers'. However, the Kerala State Literacy Mission Authority has envisaged a one-of-its-kind social literacy programme that will identify individuals from these hamlets to impart training to their fellow community members. So, instead of the teachers, whom they consider outsiders, the new literacy drive will train the 'preraks' (instructors) from these regions, who can then take the learning to their own settlements and educate their community. Education is not limited to children and youth in this mission; anyone, regardless of age, can be taught.

Attempts to organise tribals and dalits, which began in the late 1990s, are now yielding results in the form of youth organizations. Those who have learned and are involved in student and youth political movements are actively supporting them. As they are younger, they are more exposed to a larger public, allowing them to transcend community divisions. Among them, the initiatives of Adishakthi Summer School are very remarkable. The tribal youth volunteers of the Adishakti Summer School in Kerala are helping to empower the students from marginalised communities by creating awareness among them about higher education and helping them apply for courses. Adishakti Summer School, an initiative of Adivasi Gotra Mahasabha founder Shri. M. Geetanandan, is aimed at raising awareness among marginalised children about the scope of higher education. It was established in 2014 to reduce the dropout rate among dalit and adivasi students in the state. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when tribals found it difficult to apply for higher education courses, these volunteers assisted them in doing so. So, initiatives like this from the youth of the tribal community play a very crucial role in motivating the tribal students to enroll in higher education. They can set a good example for these students and their families. They can also conduct awareness programmes on the

importance of higher education in the developmental process. They can hold camps and other set-ups during course admission, assisting the underdeveloped with the admission procedures. The changes are visible, at least in some corners. More and more youngsters are joining such movements these days. Vanitha from the Kurichyar tribe (Kalpetta, Wayanad district) commented that,

"As educated youth from the most marginalized community, we are doing everything we can to make the most of the education we have received. We do not want our younger ones to consider getting their dream course or education as a difficult task. We as a community are trying our best to help them out in every possible way for the educational growth they deserve as citizens of India."

Another initiative by the tribal youth of Kerala is the activities of Ontu-Nilluva, a Tribal Education Methodology (TEM) youth forum. Ontu-Nilluva as an engagement framework will help the Government of Kerala to implement the TEM model to enhance tribal youth-led community engagement, empowerment, and policy intervention. This initiative aims to accelerate the partnership of tribal youth with the Government of Kerala and to reduce the risk of marginalisation and poverty among the tribal youth. Initiatives like this will definitely open ways and motivate the educational development of tribals in the state. Similarly, the mainstream political parties have also started to organise tribal youth exclusively these days. Even though they are not for higher education, such initiatives will also make tribal youth more informed about career options based on education. Among them, 'Gothra Sree' is an initiative by Kudumbhashree.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as a community can make a significant contribution to the upliftment of scheduled tribes through higher education. They can serve as a platform for tribal students to safely continue their studies as long as they are professionally organised by dedicated people. As usual, NGOs can expose tribal students to a wider world of opportunities and the needed resources there. Well known and amateur NGOs are operating in the tribal regions of Kerala already. Whether or not they are successful in implementing projects or programs, their presence in tribal communities can be used to address the root causes of those problems. These organisations can help in passing information on higher education as well as expose students to higher avenues of educational facilities for their own survival. Uthaman of the Wayanad Girijana Seva Trust shared his goals, vision, and experience while working in the field. He said,

"It is true that we NGOs are doing business while doing social service; but without that economic incentive we cannot survive. We are able to support vulnerable people from tribal communities to get a better living."

Uthaman is not a tribal person, but he is working among them. His organisation is more concerned with school education than with higher education. But agreed that they are doing their best to support anyone approaching them for higher education within their limits.

Compared to the Wayanad Girijana Seva Trust, which supports all scheduled tribes in general, PEEP Wayanad is exclusively working among the Paniyar tribes in Wayanad, Kannur, Kozhikode and Malappuram districts. Ancy, who represents a converted Christian family originally from the same community, shared her experience about the educational impacts of the organisation in the region.

"The best example of an NGO's impact on higher education is myself alone. Now I am doing a PhD on tribal sociology. We are doing similar interventions in the Paniya community too."

We should agree that more and more students from scheduled tribes are joining for higher education. The only thing is that such changes should be continuous and consistent. It was very recently that the urban-based NADI Foundation established a library in Podiyam, a remote tribal settlement in the Kottur region of Thiruvananthapuram district, where Kannikkar is the majority. Through such initiatives, NGOs can fill the gaps in government initiatives. On the other side, NGOs are helping the targeted population to access government projects too. They sometimes develop better solutions to the scheduled tribes' pressing problems as professionals. NGOs can identify those who require encouragement, assistance, or financial aid in higher education and provide it. It is true that NGOs working for tribal causes were accused of fraud as well. Recently, the SC-ST department called for an inquiry on HRDS India after receiving complaints about the construction of poor-quality homes. However, Kerala's scheduled tribes are constantly on the receiving end of the NGO's activities. They motivate the tribals by showcasing the various benefits they can derive from education. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play an important role in the actual on-the-ground implementation of various government schemes and policies. Further, they help in creating awareness among the children of the importance of education in their development. Some NGOs run primary schools in remote areas, helping the poor and unprivileged. These NGOs act as a system of checks and ensure the implementation of schemes at the ground level. Thus, in a wide community like

tribals, these organisations are very important to reach the grassroots of each of the sub-communities.

Considering the lack of unity among the different scheduled tribes, inter-community discussions and socialisation with each other are necessary among them. Making them aware of their commonality despite their differences is not an easy task. But without standing with each other, they cannot resist or bargain with mainstream society or the state administration. The heterogeneity among the scheduled tribes is hardly respected by the outside world, either due to ignorance or due to convenience. As a result, diverse scheduled tribe organisational formats are urgently required among them. In order to strengthen their presence in higher education as well, such unity is needed.

The injustice against scheduled tribes in higher education is not limited to a lack of institutions or a lack of learning materials about them. There have been complaints about the non-filling of the Scheduled Tribes quota in admission, the non-disbursement of the ST fund among students, and excessive delays in responding to scheduled tribe students' complaints, among other things. The following comment made by Sudheer of the K R Narayanan Institute of Visual Science and Arts (Kottayam district) points to this issue:

"We were treated with less respect everywhere. The ST seat admission should be notified three times, but they won't do it and will eventually declare these seats for non-ST applicants, citing an absence of sufficient applications. In those complaints on discrimination and caste abuse, the officials respond very passively. The indifferent treatment of privileged individuals, whether students, teachers, or staff, is very disappointing."

Sudheer is a degree holder and an emerging activist among the scheduled tribes. He admits that the lack of togetherness among the scheduled tribes is a matter of concern that needs to be addressed. If the social movements of the present day do not address the vertical hierarchy and associated discrimination within scheduled tribes, it will continue to affect their rights and interests only in the long run.

2. Role of Gender in Determining Higher Education among Scheduled Tribes:

Understanding and addressing gender issues is critical to people's development, particularly in the field of education. There exists a social gap between men and women universally, and it is particularly evident in tradition-bound societies like India. Although women have started to come forward and stand on equal footing with men in the country, they

have a long way to go as well. Those who are members of scheduled tribes are at the bottom of the societal hierarchy. They are facing more discrimination than anyone else in Indian society. In Kerala, tribal women are the most disadvantaged considering the levels of illiteracy and unemployment. The status of women in a society is described in terms of their level of income, employment, education, health, etc. Tribal women have the lowest literacy and highest unemployment rates in the state. They are not even paid the same as men for the same amount of work. As one of the respondents, named Karthi from the Kani tribe (Peringamala, Thiruvananthapuram district), commented,

"We always lag behind our men in every aspect of our lives. Enrolling ourselves in higher education is a far-fetched dream for us, as the decisions of our lives are not taken by us but are decided and forced on us by the males in our family and community. We are forced into marriages or to take up family responsibilities and go for any job without any decent pay."

This shows how the tribal women in Kerala lag behind in educational development. They are still treated unequally in various areas, for instance, societal status, educational opportunities, accessibility to health facilities, economic decision-making, and many others. As mentioned before, they have to face multiple forms of discrimination in every realm of society. In the educational institutions, they are primarily being treated as a backward community; second, they are treated as inferior by the lower caste people; and finally, as secondary beings by their own tribal men. The degree of discrimination rises as they rise up the educational ladder. This may lead to the less enthusiastic participation of tribal women in educational institutions. Bindu from the Kurumbas (Palakkayam, Palakkad district) shared her experience of discrimination in educational institutions as follows:

"We as the tribal students have to go through multiple layers of discrimination, from the students belonging to the upper class and from the teachers, even from our own males. We are still treated as outcastes and untouchables, the students from other communities are not ready to be friends with us and don't even share anything with us. We are used to this kind of discrimination by now, yet it is painful and demotivating."

Discrimination like this in educational institutions leads to higher dropout rates for tribal women than for men. If such discrimination is acute in educational institutions, it is not difficult to expect its presence in conventional tribal societies. The only difference is their

increased intensity. They are denied the ability to make personal decisions and are not expected to express their views on societal issues. Others make decisions about their lives without seeking their permission. The reasons for such acute gender discrimination among them are due to the rigid cultural practices, ritual servitude, and strict customs that have been followed for several generations. Despite the fact that the majority of tribal communities in Kerala follow a matriarchal system of inheritance, women are not given important roles in the family. The tribal women of Kerala are barred from exercising power over land or performing rituals, sacrifices, or other associated religious practices. Women are considered slaves, and women themselves believe that they are supposed to work hard for the well-being of the men and other family members. Kanaka (Kani tribe, Vithura, Thiruvananthapuram district) revealed something shocking in relation to this.

"I cleared JRF and am presently doing a PhD in sociology. Despite my objections, my family decided to marry me immediately after I received my MPhil. He was not even a degree holder, but there were hardly any better options in front of me. In the community, there was hardly anyone with more or equal qualifications to me. Hence, I was left with no options."

Within Kerala, the most illiterate are the tribal women. A tribal girl has no voice to say on the topic of education. It is all up to the parents' decision. Perhaps some communities in the tribal world want to educate their women and girls. They are, however, considerably less. Some wanted to send their girls to school, but some thought that it was useless to educate girls. They are strongly encouraged to join the labour force and to help improve the economic condition of their own house. They send their girls to school only for three to four years to get a primary school education and learn how to write and read their names, then they withdraw from it. There are also strong feelings of gender disparity among parents, who want to provide better preference to sons for education at the cost of daughters. Janu from the Irular tribe shares the attitude of her parents toward educating her.

"As in any other Indian community, the women in our tribes are also considered only good for household duties. Educating the women is considered unnecessary. When I expressed my desire for a higher education in my family, I was not taken seriously, and my mother told me that women who study are not considered good. They asked me to marry someone from our tribe, manage the households, and work hard for the livelihood of my husband's family. When it

came to the education of my brother, my parents considered it as an asset for them. He got that opportunity with ease as well."

However, the establishment of Model Residential Schools (MRSs) was path-breaking. But how successful they are in providing quality education to the tribal people is yet to be questioned. The lack of proper infrastructure and facilities in these schools is affecting the education of children very badly. The student's ability to learn may be affected by inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene in the toilets in several ways. Girls and boys are likely to be affected differently by inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene in schools, and this may contribute to unequal learning opportunities. Sometimes, girls and female teachers are affected more than boys because the lack of sanitary facilities which prevents them from attending school during menstruation. There are high-level risks of transmission of communicable diseases at the Model Residential Schools, because of community dining, sleeping, sanitation, and hygiene in boarding schools unless adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities are provided for all children. One of the students from the MRS school shared that their condition in the schools and hostels was very poor. She commented that,

"The hostel space and toilets are of great concern to us. The toilets in schools and hostels are not clean, and they even lack basic materials like doors, buckets, cups, etc. We are even forced to clean the toilets in schools. Lack of proper sanitary facilities is affecting us badly, especially during our menstruation period."

The hostel facilities and needs are different for the male and female tribal students. Many of these hostels lack proper facilities, especially space. There are no study rooms, affecting the quality of their learning process. Many of the hostellers, especially girls, suffer from health issues related to hygiene. They do not even have areas for drying clothes, forcing them to wear wet undergarments; this may also lead to severe dermatological issues, which are contagious. The toilets in the hostels are poorly maintained. It lacks basic facilities for providing privacy, like doors, and basic materials, like a bucket. These hostels lack girl-friendly systems, as most of them lack a proper system for the supply and processing of sanitary napkins. A student from the MRS in Palakkad shared their pathetic condition like this.

"We lack proper accommodation facilities in the hostels. Most of the rooms are overcrowded, and there are no spaces for storing our clothes and other belongings. We even lack a proper place for washing and drying our clothes,

forcing us to wear wet underwear and uniforms. This is causing infections and rashes in our private parts. As all our clothes are put together due to the lack of storage space, this spreads from one student to the other."

Even though our focus area was the higher education sector, the focus group discussions crossed over to school education most of the time. As the majority of them had extensive experience with school education, they attempted to elaborate on it. Considering the limited exposure of tribal youth to higher education, understanding and addressing their fundamental grievances through school education was also decisive. However, after conducting focused interviews with some college-going students, the scholar was able to collect some in-depth reflections on their experience with the system.

The lack of trained teachers and office staff is one serious issue standing as a barrier to the entry and continuation of the tribal students in higher education. As most of the teachers are from non-tribal communities, they cannot understand the feelings, needs and limitations of the tribal students. This mainly affects female students. As they are away from their family and parents, they are in need of emotional support from the teachers and counsellors. These students are at the age when their emotional and mental needs are to be taken care of, especially due to the hormonal changes happening in them due to adolescence. Even though this is cited as a general issue faced by other women students too, the impact is much bigger for women students from scheduled tribes. Sreeja's experience was quite shocking. She dropped out of BA Malayalam in the fifth semester after an incident happened in the classroom. She belongs to the Mala Pandaram community of the Konni region, Pathanathitta. Once in the classroom, she had heavy bleeding, which caused anger in her classmates, especially women. In her own words,

"I had irregular periods and heavy bleeding. But what happened that day was horrible. Even though it was a very disgusting situation, the way other female classmates and teachers responded was shocking. They insulted me in front of others, and hardly anyone came to my aid. They mentioned my scheduled tribe status more than once in between."

What happened to Sreeja is a normal case for many women, and usually others will address it without anyone's notice, particularly boys or male teachers. Food habits, climatic conditions, and physical weaknesses can cause it. But what happened there — the dropping out of a girl student from such backgrounds — reflects the magnitude of the gender problems in

the state. Even though the above incident was reported in 2012, there may have been similar incidents that happened later too.

The hidden, undeclared, or informal discrimination against scheduled tribe women is most evident in peer interaction too. Even though friendships and groups are forming without considering religion and caste, tribal girls are not wholeheartedly welcomed by everyone. Others do not incorporate them into team events like dance or drama. Seema (Paniya tribe, Meppadi, Wayanad district) shared her experience in this context as follows:

"It is true that no one rejects us in college outright; but they keep a calculated distance every time. Our physical appearance may make them believe that we are a different species. We, too, gradually learn to become more attached to our people alone."

As colleges are the continuation of our public places, the popular notions of 'we' and 'they' get reproduced there too. Usually, students carry it unconsciously. Teachers, as learned and experienced professionals, are expected to break down these dominant notions of identity-based personnel associations. Arts programmes are ideal opportunities for that. If teachers insist on the inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds in each competing team, it will lead to more social interactions among them. If those who discriminated earlier were sufficiently motivated, it will help them advance further in social circles. However, teachers are also products of the same society that justifies discrimination against scheduled tribes. When female students complain about the quality of food in the hostels, the wardens (who are usually teachers) will dismiss the complaint without even considering its merits. Shanthi's comments explain it perfectly.

"When I complained about food in the hostel, the warden became very angry. We used to eat millets and vegetables, which we used to cultivate on our own land. When I came to the hostel, the food available here was entirely new to me, like rice and curries. I found it very difficult to get adjusted to this food pattern. Most often, I suffer from fatigue, stomach ache, and nausea. Our food and health conditions are not taken seriously by the hostel authorities, which is ultimately leading to poor health. It should be noted that the government is giving them funds for our food too. That is our right. How can she say that the menu cannot be decided for the comfort of tribal students alone? What is on the hostel menu that is tribal? It was always and everywhere the non-tribals' normal food."

According to Shanthi, her persistent protests resulted in the addition of tribal food to the hostel menu, but it was gradually removed due to widespread opposition by others. It was heard that there are separate washrooms for hostlers according to their categories. Maybe this classification is not based on caste or class, but officials should ensure the absence of such practices.

Menstruation is affecting the attendance of girls too. Girls in most of the scheduled tribes are forbidden from meeting boys during their menstrual period. This affects the attendance of several day scholars. If students miss classes, it will be difficult for them to catch up. Gradually, they may lose interest in studying too. Teachers can address this by maintaining interactions with the parents of those day scholars who are in such a situation.

Tribal women face discrimination in almost all dimensions of life, especially in the case of higher education. They are discriminated against not only because of their sex but also because of religious, social, and cultural structures that have given them the lowest position in the social hierarchy. In areas such as health, education, housing, employment, wages, the application of legal rights, decision-making and political participation, and rural development, tribal women have been almost entirely excluded from development policies and programmes. They continue to be impoverished women.

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