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A Social Development Perspective on Tribal Youth Aspirations and Educational Experiences in Ukhrul and Senapati Districts

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Abstract: This review paper explores the educational experiences and evolving aspirations of Tangkhul and Maram tribal youth in the Ukhrul and Senapati districts of Manipur, India, through the lens of social development. However, it draws on secondary sources such as academic literature, government reports, NGO publications, and policy documents. Furthermore, the paper examines how formal education influences identity formation, community engagement, and pathways to social mobility among tribal students. It considers the historical marginalisation of tribal communities in India's Northeast and critically reflects on how socio-cultural values intersect with development paradigms and educational structures. Additionally, the paper identifies recurring themes such as the conflict between traditional and modern identities, the role of family and community expectations, and the impact of state and institutional frameworks on access and quality of education. Reviewing these dynamics, the paper emphasises the potential of culturally inclusive and participatory educational models to promote equitable social development. The paper strongly advocates for more community-driven and context-sensitive educational strategies that can align with the aspirations and lived realities of tribal youth in these districts.

Keywords: Tangkhul and Maram Tribe, Tribal Youth identity, Social Development, Educational Aspirations, Indigenous Education.

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JEL Codes: I: Health, Education and Welfare; (I12) Education and Research Institutions; (I13) Welfare, Well-Being and Poverty; R: Urban, Rural, Regional, Real Estate and Transportation Economics; (R0) General; (R1) General Regional Economics; (R2) Household Analysis; Z: Other Special Topics; (Z0) General; (Z1) Cultural Economics; Economic Sociology; Economic Anthropology

Introduction

"The educational experiences of tribal communities in India's Northeast have emerged as a critical area of scholarly interest, driven by the region's historical marginalisation, cultural specificity, and strategic geo-political positioning" (Baruah, 2005; McDuie-Ra, 2011). Among the various Indigenous groups inhabiting this region, the Tangkhul and Maram tribes of Ukhrul and Senapati districts in Manipur provide a compelling lens to explore the evolving relationship between formal education, indigenous identity, and youth aspirations. "Despite the proliferation of educational policies and infrastructure development over the past few decades, the lived experiences of tribal youth navigating educational systems remain shaped by structural inequities, socio-cultural norms, and political constraints" (Nongbri, 2003; Vangamla, 2020).

Educational access and outcomes among Indigenous communities in "Northeast India have drawn significant attention due to the persistent challenges of underdevelopment, ethnic tensions, and state neglect" (Karlsson & Subba, 2006; Xaxa, 2005). In this context, the Tangkhul and Maram tribes represent distinct ethnolinguistic groups and microcosms of broader change processes.

While formal education has increasingly been viewed as a vehicle of upward mobility and social transformation, it also "functions as a space where youth negotiate complex identities amid the competing demands of tradition and modernity" (Shimray, 2007; Kipgen, 2013). This paper is situated within this tension, critically examining how tribal youth engage with education as both a transformative force and a contested site of cultural negotiation.

The significance of this review lies in its attempt to illuminate the nuanced and evolving educational experiences of tribal youth from a social development perspective. "It moves beyond simplistic metrics of access and achievement to foreground the subjective meanings, emotional investments, and socio-cultural negotiations accompanying Indigenous youth's educational journeys" (Balagopalan, 2014; Dei, 2008). By exploring intersections between customary institutions,

indigenous knowledge systems, and formal education, the study contributes to broader discourses on inclusive and culturally sensitive development paradigms.

The primary objective of this paper is to explore how broader processes of social development, identity formation, and institutional engagement influence educational aspirations among Tangkhul and Maram youth. A secondary objective is to examine the mediating role of family, community structures, and customary institutions in shaping educational experiences. "Additionally, the paper assesses the alignment (or lack thereof) of current educational policies and practices with the cultural and aspirational realities of tribal youth in these districts" (Nambissan, 2010; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2021).

Methodologically, this paper adopts a conceptual and interpretive framework, drawing on a critical review of secondary data. The analysis is based on peer-reviewed journal articles, ethnographic monographs, "government reports, census data, and grey literature from NGOs and civil society organisations. Emphasis is placed on sources that provide Indigenous perspectives and explore the socio-cultural dimensions of education among Northeast Indian tribes" (Boro, 2019; Roy Burman, 1994). The thematic analysis of these materials aims to synthesise existing scholarship and identify conceptual gaps concerning tribal education in the frameworks of social development and Indigenous education.

Theoretically, the paper draws upon two interrelated perspectives: "the social development approach, which views education as a collective and equity-driven process aimed at enhancing capabilities, participation, and well-being" (Midgley, 1995; Patel, 2015), and the Indigenous education framework, "which emphasizes culturally responsive pedagogies, identity-affirming curricula, and the preservation of traditional knowledge systems" (Battiste, 2002; Smith, 1999). These frameworks provide the conceptual tools necessary to interrogate how tribal youth in Ukhrul and Senapati districts navigate the promises and paradoxes of formal education in a postcolonial, development-oriented state.

Objectives

This paper critically explores the educational experiences of the Tangkhul and Maram tribes of Ukhrul and Senapati districts in Manipur, focusing on the socio-cultural, institutional, and developmental dimensions influencing tribal youth's educational aspirations and outcomes. The specific objectives are:

- To examine how formal education influences identity formation, social mobility, and aspirations among Tangkhul and Maram tribal youth.
- To assess the role of family, community institutions (e.g., *Pei*, *Hanga*), and religious bodies in shaping educational choices and outcomes.
- Evaluate how state-led education policies align (or misalign) with indigenous knowledge systems, values, and cultural frameworks.
- To explore how gender, economic status, and migration patterns intersect with educational access and achievement.
- To identify gaps in current educational provisions and propose culturally sensitive policy and practice recommendations.

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual and interpretive research design underpinned by a critical literature review and secondary data analysis. The approach is rooted in interdisciplinary engagement across anthropology, the sociology of education, Indigenous studies, and development discourse, enabling a multidimensional exploration of educational experiences among tribal communities.

Data Sources

"The study utilises diverse secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, ethnographic monographs, policy documents" (e.g., *National Education Policy [NEP], 2020*), census data from the Government of India, NGO reports, and archival records. These sources offer empirical and historical insights into the socio-educational realities of tribal communities in Northeast India, particularly within the Ukhrul and Senapati districts of Manipur, home to the Tangkhul and Maram Naga communities.

Analytical Lens

The analysis is guided by two key theoretical frameworks: "the Social Development Approach" (Midgley, 1995), "which emphasizes the integration of economic and social policies for inclusive development, and the Indigenous Education Framework" (Battiste, 2002), which foregrounds Indigenous knowledge systems, epistemologies, and the right to culturally responsive education. These frameworks help critically

evaluate how education can serve as a transformative tool and a contested terrain, especially in tribal and postcolonial settings.

Analytical Tools

The study employs thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and gaps within the literature and policy discourse. A contextual interpretive method is used to situate these findings within broader socio-political and cultural frameworks. This includes an emphasis on structural factors, such as state policies and institutional practices, and agentive dimensions, including community resistance, adaptation, and participation in education.

Scope and Context

The geographical focus is on the Ukhrul and Senapati districts in the hill regions of Manipur, with particular attention to the Tangkhul and Maram tribal groups. These communities offer rich contexts for examining how education is shaped by historical marginalisation, Indigenous identity, and ongoing developmental interventions.

"This methodology aims to produce a nuanced understanding of education as an interplay of structure, agency, and culture" (Giddens, 1984) and contribute to more inclusive and context-sensitive educational policy and practice.

Geographical and Administrative Overview of Manipur

"Manipur, located in the northeastern corner of India, spans an area of 22,356 square kilometres, with approximately 90% of its terrain comprising hills and only 10% valleys" (Philawon, 2025). The state lies between latitudes 23°53'N to 25°45'N and longitudes 93°58'E to 94°45'E. "It borders Nagaland to the north, Mizoram and Myanmar to the south, Myanmar to the east, and Assam to the west" (Philawon, 2025).

In a significant administrative development on December 9, 2016, Manipur expanded its district count to 16. "The state currently includes six valley districts—Bishnupur, Imphal East, Imphal West, Jiribam, Kakching, and Thoubal—and ten hill districts—Chandel, Churachandpur, Kamjong, Kangpokpi, Noney, Pherzawl, Senapati, Tamenglong, Tengnoupal, and Ukhrul" (SLBC, 2023). The June 2011 census revealed disparities in population and sex ratio among these districts. For instance, the combined population of Kakching and Thoubal was 422,168, "with a

sex ratio of 998 females per 1,000 males, while Kamjong and Ukhrul had 183,998 people, with a sex ratio of 916. Senapati district recorded a population of 479,148 and a sex ratio of 939 females per 1,000 males" (SLBC, 2023).

Senapati District and the Maram Tribe

Senapati district, formerly known as the Manipur North District until its renaming on July 15, 1983, is "situated in the northern part of Manipur and shares borders with Nagaland, Thoubal, Bishnupur, Ukhrul, and Tamenglong" (Athickal, 1992). Covering 3,271 square kilometres, the district is entirely hilly, with elevations between 1,061 and 1,778 metres above sea level. "As of the 2011 census, it had a population of 285,404 and a population density of 180 persons per square kilometre" (Census, 2011). The district headquarters, located in Senapati town (Tahamzam), governs several subdivisions, including Mao-Maram (Tadubi), Sadar Hills East (Saikul), and Sadar Hills West (Kangpokpi), the latter of which became a separate district in 2016.

The Maram tribe, a prominent sub-group of the Naga ethnic community, is primarily concentrated in the Mao-Maram subdivision, particularly around Tadubi, situated 42.5 kilometres north of Senapati town along NH 39. While many Maram villages are in the hills, newer settlements like Tumuyon Khullen and Mayangkhang have emerged along the highway.

Cultural Identity and Language

The Maram are classified as a Scheduled Tribe under the Indian Constitution and maintain a unique cultural and linguistic identity within the larger Naga ethnolinguistic landscape. The Maram dialect, part of the Tibeto-Burman language family, remains central to intra-community communication. "However, younger generations increasingly use English and Manipuri for educational and intergroup purposes. UNESCO has listed the Maram language as "vulnerable," meaning that while most children still speak it, usage is increasingly confined to the home and village domains (James, 2017). Given the language's lack of an indigenous script, the Roman alphabet, introduced by Christian missionaries, has been adopted for writing. Despite this adaptation, academic documentation on the Maram remains limited, underscoring the need for comprehensive linguistic and anthropological research.

Socio-Cultural Practices and Governance

"The Maram tribe celebrates several traditional festivals rooted in their agrarian lifestyle. Among these, the Punghi Festival (July) and Kanghi Festival (December) are prominent, marking key phases in the agricultural calendar" (James, 2017). Their social structure is centred around the Pei, or traditional village council, comprising male elders from each clan. This body adjudicates disputes, enforces customary laws, and oversees rituals. In some villages, a chieftainship system exists, often hereditary but subject to elder approval to maintain ritual continuity and social cohesion. "A notable example is Sagong Namba, crowned in 2011 after the death of Queen Apei Hinga, the widow of the former King Karang" (James, 2017). Religiously, most Marams have adopted Christianity, although a minority continues to observe animist traditions, creating a complex interplay of cultural adaptation and heritage preservation.

Economy and Livelihood

The Marams are primarily agrarian, with livelihoods based on shifting (jhum) and terrace cultivation. They grow rice, maize, and legumes, particularly in higher altitudes. The Barak River traverses the district and supports fertile valleys suitable for rice farming. Animal rearing, including pigs, poultry, and cattle, plays a vital socio-economic role, as does small-scale craftsmanship involving traditional tools and woodwork. Although commerce was traditionally discouraged, economic diversification is now visible, especially among younger community members.

"The Maram region comprises subtropical monsoon climate zones with varied soil types, including alluvium, laterite, black regur, and red ferruginous soil" (Brown, 1873). While the district is heavily forested, only a limited portion is used for agriculture and habitation.

Clan System and Social Organisation

The Marams follow a rigid patrilineal clan system, locally known as *khels* or *mei*. These clans are exogamous, with strict prohibitions against intra-clan marriage. Each clan has defined roles in communal ceremonies, and important life events such as birth, marriage, and death involve clan-specific customs. Social cooperation is institutionalised through communal labour systems like *loutak*, which highlight collective responsibility and mutual support.

The Maram tribe of Senapati district represents a rich blend of tradition and transformation. While rooted in age-old customs, agricultural practices, and clan-based social structures, they gradually integrate modern educational, linguistic, and economic influences. As a community with a vulnerable language and unique socio-cultural fabric, the Marams stand at a critical juncture where preservation and innovation must coexist to ensure cultural continuity and socio-economic advancement.

Tangkhul Tribe

Ukhrul District, located in the north-eastern state of Manipur, India, is known for its scenic beauty, rolling hills, and rich biodiversity. The district headquarters are in Ukhrul town, situated about 84 kilometres from Imphal. "It is predominantly inhabited by the Tangkhul Naga tribe, which has a vibrant cultural heritage and primarily practices Christianity. It was introduced by missionaries in the late 19th century. Covering an area of approximately 4,544 square kilometres (Simon, 2025), Ukhrul is mainly agrarian, with rice, maize, and horticultural produce forming the backbone of its economy. The district is also home to the rare and endangered Shirui Lily (*Lilium Mackliniae*), which blooms on the Shirui Kashong Peak and is recognised as the state flower of Manipur. In 2016, the district was bifurcated to create Kamjong District, improving administrative outreach. Ukhrul is noted for its relatively high literacy rate and strong Christian educational infrastructure. It is also a growing tourist destination, drawing attention with cultural festivals like Luira Phanit and the annual State Shirui Lily Festival, which celebrate the district's unique natural and cultural heritage.

The Tangkhul tribe is one of the major Naga tribes inhabiting the Ukhrul district of Manipur. Belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, the Tangkhul are believed to be of Mongoloid origin, with strong historical and cultural affiliations to other Naga tribes of Northeast India and Northwest Myanmar. Their settlements are primarily located in the hilly terrain of eastern Manipur, stretching along the Indo-Myanmar international boundary. The Tangkhuls speak the Tangkhul dialect, which falls under the Kuki-Chin-Naga branch of the Tibeto-Burman language group. While each village may have its dialectal variation, a standard dialect was the initiative of "William Pettigrew, the first missionary in the land of the Tangkhuls to start the journey of making a common language for the Tangkhuls, which

initially come to be known as -Tangkhul Tui—has emerged and is commonly used in education, media, and inter-village communication" (Horam, Shimreingam, 2016; Roland, 2013). Tangkhul society is traditionally organised along clan-based lineages, with a strong emphasis on communitarian values, village autonomy, and elders' councils/councils of the heads of the clan for dispute resolution.

The most prominent festival of the Tangkhuls is Luira Phanit (the seed-sowing festival), which is celebrated to mark the beginning of the agricultural cycle. Traditional dances, songs, indigenous sports, and communal feasting characterise it. Other cultural practices include elaborate shawl weaving, wood carving, and folk music. Just before the monsoon season begins, the Yarra feast is celebrated according to their "Yarnao" peer group for all ages. Then, right after the plantation season gets over, which is usually the withdrawal of the monsoon season, the Tangkhuls celebrate Mangkhap, where the people relax and enjoy feasting after heavy, intense, and rigorous work, and by October, when the paddy and the fruits/ vegetables began to grow at its best the feast of Dhareo is being celebrated. It is when they bring their first fruit to the sales ground and exchange their products, including the crafts and looms. After the harvest, which is usually in the fall of the year, the Thanksgiving celebration, known as Chumpha Phanit, where the rituals are often done by the women and men folk have to go away to the field carrying with them the tools and weapons so that the goddess of the granary is not injured while coming out for from its resting place. Even now, the women are taking the best of their harvest to the church as an offering to the creator.

"According to the 2011 Census and administrative estimates, the Tangkhuls primarily inhabit the Ukhrul and Kamjong districts, accounting for a population of over 180,000" (SLBCNE, 2023). Their settlements are typically rural, with agriculture, particularly Terrace and Jhum cultivation, forming the community's economic backbone. Literacy rates among the Tangkhuls are relatively high compared to other tribal communities in the region.

The Tangkhul Nagas have a well-defined clan-based social structure that plays a central role in shaping their cultural identity, social interactions, and customary practices.

Tangkhul society is traditionally organized into patrilineal clans, locally called *Kharar*. Each clan traces its origin to a common ancestor, and kinship is important. These clans are exogamous, meaning marriage within the same clan is strictly prohibited. Clan identity governs inheritance, marriage alliances, and social

responsibilities. Specific clans hold traditional roles in many villages, such as the priesthood or leadership. The Tangkhul practice the Phratry system. Villages function as autonomous socio-political units, governed by a council of elders/ the council of the head of the clans (*Hanga*), usually drawn from the senior and respected men of the village. These councils adjudicate disputes, oversee customary law, and make decisions on land use, rituals, and festivals. While not uniform across all Tangkhul villages, many maintain a hereditary chieftainship system (*Awungshi*), where the village chief holds political and ritual authority. In other villages, leadership may be more democratic, with elder councils assuming collective governance. The Tangkhul Nagas have traditionally relied on subsistence agriculture as their primary means of livelihood. The dominant agricultural practices include:

- Jhum cultivation (shifting cultivation): Practiced on hill slopes, clearing forested areas, burning vegetation, and cultivating crops such as rice, maize, millet, and tubers.
- Terrace farming: In more settled areas, the Tangkhuls cultivate wet rice on terraced fields, particularly in valleys and near water sources.
- Animal husbandry: Domestication of pigs, poultry, and cattle is common, serving both subsistence and ceremonial purposes.
- Forest-based livelihood: Foraging for wild edibles, medicinal plants, and firewood is a traditional activity, particularly for women and children.
- Weaving and handicrafts: Women are skilled in weaving traditional shawls and garments using backstrap looms, often sold or exchanged locally.

Contemporary Changes

- The decline in jhum cultivation: Due to environmental degradation, population pressure, and government restrictions, shifting cultivation is declining in favour of settled agriculture or other forms of income.
- Education and employment: With increased literacy and access to education, many Tangkhul youths are now employed in government services, teaching, NGOs, and the church.
- Migration: Out-migration to cities like Imphal, Dimapur, or even metropolitan centres like Delhi has increased, with employment shifting to urban labour, service industries, and entrepreneurship.

- Agro-entrepreneurship: Some educated Tangkhuls are now adopting organic farming, horticulture, and cash crop production (e.g., ginger, pineapple) as sustainable livelihoods.
- Tourism and cultural industries: Interest in eco-tourism and ethnic festivals is growing, providing seasonal or supplemental income.

The history of education among the tribal communities of Northeast India—particularly the Nagas—reflects a profound synthesis of cultural continuity and adaptive innovation. While contemporary narratives of education often prioritise the advent of formal, script-based schooling, indigenous learning systems among the Nagas thrived long before the penetration of colonial and missionary structures. This paper examines the traditional Naga dormitory system as a sophisticated indigenous model of education, tracing its evolution and eventual transformation in India's colonial and post-independence educational paradigms, focusing on Manipur's Ukhrul and Senapati districts.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Pre-Colonial Northeast India:

In the pre-colonial period, the absence of a written script among the Nagas did not imply the absence of structured education. On the contrary, Indigenous education was embedded within the social fabric and functioned through oral transmission, observation, and participatory learning. Among the Nagas, knowledge was acquired in context—be it in agriculture, warfare, handicrafts, or social customs. "A mythical account among the Nagas tells of the loss of their script due to a dog that ran away with their written language inscribed on animal skin—a symbolic representation of the community's subsequent reliance on oral, performative, and experiential pedagogy" (Shimray,1967).

The Morung as a Pedagogical Institution:

Known by different names among various Naga tribes—the *Longshim* among the Tangkhuls, for example—the boys' dormitory was a communal institution that transcended the narrow definition of a school.

"It was simultaneously a training ground, military camp, cultural archive, and socialising agent. Induction into the Morung usually occurred between the ages of 10 and 15, and the boys remained residents until marriage, although some continued voluntarily" (Shimary, 1985).

Instruction within the Morung was multifaceted: boys were trained in agricultural techniques, hunting, craftsmanship, warfare, tribal law, etiquette, and oral history. Beyond skill development, the Morung emphasised the moral and social virtues essential for adult life—courage, loyalty, discipline, communal responsibility, and empathy. Storytelling by elders, group singing, and moral discourse were central pedagogical methods.

The dormitory also served as a critical space for communal defence, especially during periods of inter-village conflict. The youth took turns standing vigil, ready to defend their village. A central feature of many Morungs was the war drum, whose rhythmic signals conveyed messages of danger or celebration, reinforcing collective consciousness and emotional unity.

Historical Evolution of Education in Tribal Northeast India

Without state structures or formal schooling, the dormitory system served as the principal mode of education. It was holistic, embedded in communal life, and adjusted to ecological and cultural specificities. Knowledge systems were transmitted orally, communally, and through lived experiences.

"The advent of British colonialism marked a significant shift. Missionary groups—primarily Christian—introduced formal education, motivated by religious goals such as evangelisation and disseminating Biblical texts. In the Naga Hills, early schools were established by missionaries like Miles Bronson and Edward Winter Clark, who promoted literacy through Roman script adaptations" (Philawon, 2025).

These missionary schools provided structured education in literacy, arithmetic, and religious instruction. However, they also gradually eroded traditional dormitory institutions, which were increasingly viewed as incompatible with Christian moral codes. In some cases, however, the missionaries repurposed dormitories as Christian youth centres, integrating Bible study and hymn singing into the communal life of the dormitory. Colonial educational policies were limited in scope and heavily reliant on missionary infrastructure. Government investment in tribal education was minimal, though occasional efforts were made to support missionary schools and produce a literate indigenous elite that could serve colonial administration.

Following Indian independence, educational policy shifted from missionary-driven models to state-led efforts, albeit with limited efficacy. The Constitution of India, through provisions such as "Article 46, emphasised the promotion of

the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Tribes. Reservations in educational institutions and scholarships were introduced to bridge systemic gaps (Philawon, 2025). The Indian state adopted development paradigms centred on assimilation and national integration, often sidelining the cultural specificities of tribal communities. The expansion of formal schooling systems, mainly in distant or urban areas, displaced Indigenous models like the Morung. In many cases, youth were compelled to abandon community-based education for state curricula that were culturally alien, linguistically distant, and socially isolating. Despite increased educational infrastructure, tribal regions such as Ukhrul and Senapati continue to face structural challenges: poor connectivity, shortage of trained teachers, and culturally insensitive curricula. The disintegration of the dormitory system has left a vacuum in moral and social education. While modern schools provide academic knowledge, they often fail to address the holistic formation of character and community-oriented responsibility, once nurtured in the dormitory system. The erosion of traditional institutions has also weakened intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, folklore, and ethical systems.

"The Naga dormitory system represents a sophisticated indigenous pedagogy rooted in moral instruction, social integration, and experiential learning. Its decline—precipitated by colonial intervention, missionary reinterpretation, and post-independence development models—has led to the fragmentation of communal life and the loss of culturally resonant educational spaces" (Simon, 2025). As educational planners and policymakers seek to make education more inclusive and context-sensitive, there is a pressing need to revisit Indigenous systems like the Morung—not archaic relics but as valuable frameworks for community-centred education.

Education and Aspirations among Tribal Youth

The tribal communities of Manipur, particularly those residing in the hill districts such as Ukhrul and Senapati, have historically faced significant barriers in accessing formal education. Despite constitutional provisions and targeted policies for the educational upliftment of Scheduled Tribes, the empirical evidence reveals persistent disparities in enrolment, retention, and completion rates, particularly at the secondary and higher education levels.

"According to the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) 2020-21 and the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020, tribal

youth in Manipur exhibit lower enrolment and completion rates than the general population. In secondary education, Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) for Scheduled Tribes in Manipur hover around 62%, compared to the state average of 76%". The dropout rate among tribal students in the secondary stage is estimated at 20-25%, with a significant decline in transition to higher secondary and tertiary levels. For higher education, AISHE data reveals that ST students constitute only about 7-8% of total enrolments in the state, despite forming a larger proportion of the population in certain districts.

Specific data for Tangkhul and Maram youth remains limited. However, field studies and NGO reports indicate that while these groups have shown a rising trend in school participation, significant numbers still fail to complete higher secondary education. Due to infrastructural and socio-economic constraints, remote villages in Ukhrul and Senapati continue to exhibit educational deficits. Marked disparities exist among different tribal groups and between regions. Students in district headquarters and semi-urban centres have relatively better access to educational institutions. At the same time, those in remote villages often face logistical challenges such as poor road connectivity and lack of public transportation; socio-economic status further compounds access inequalities. Children from poorer households are more likely to be pulled out of school due to direct and indirect costs, including examination fees, uniforms, and opportunity costs of labour.

Shifts in Career Aspirations and Social Mobility

With the gradual expansion of education, tribal youth are increasingly moving away from traditional occupations such as jhum cultivation, livestock rearing, and artisanal crafts. There is a noticeable shift towards aspirations for salaried employment in government, teaching, healthcare, defence services, and, more recently, the IT and entrepreneurial sectors. This transformation reflects a broader reorientation in the social imaginary of tribal youth, aligning with modern notions of success, stability, and prestige. The expansion of media, mobile internet, and migration for education and employment has significantly broadened the possibilities for tribal youth. Social media, peer influence, and contact with urban cultures have catalysed new aspirations and created alternative role models. Young people increasingly view cities not just as centres of opportunity but also as sites of cultural belonging and identity formation.

Education is widely perceived as the primary vehicle for upward social mobility and economic security. For many tribal youths, attaining a university degree or a government job is equated with respectability, autonomy, and the ability to contribute to family and community. However, there remains a gap between aspirations and tangible opportunities. The limited absorption capacity of local labour markets, the absence of career guidance, and the mismatch between curriculum and market needs hinder the realisation of these aspirations.

Gender, Class, and Rural-Urban Disparities in Educational Attainment

While gender gaps in enrolment have narrowed, disparities in performance, retention, and aspirations remain. Girls from tribal backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and parental scepticism about higher education. However, positive trends are emerging in communities where parental support and community advocacy for girls' education have gained traction. Female role models and the involvement of women's organisations have contributed to improved educational outcomes for girls in select areas.

Within tribal communities, economic stratification influences educational attainment. Children from better-off households are more likely to attend private schools, afford coaching classes, and access digital learning resources. Conversely, the poorest segments often rely on under-resourced public schools, face language barriers, and experience learning deficits.

The rural-urban divide is stark regarding school infrastructure, teacher quality, and access to supplementary education. While towns like Ukhrul and Senapati offer relatively better educational facilities and opportunities, children from interior villages often have to migrate or stay in hostels to pursue higher studies. This mobility comes with financial and emotional costs, sometimes leading to dropout or academic underperformance. Another factor is that the students are left to tend to themselves with their younger siblings alone in the rented houses without proper guardians, as the parents work in the village to support them. This situation often leads the students to fall into bad company or be unable to cope with the modern and globalised scenarios of the trendy media society, which in turn leads them to drop out of their studies.

The educational landscape among tribal youth in Manipur is undergoing a significant transformation. While access to schooling has improved, disparities in

quality, completion, and post-education opportunities persist. Aspirations among tribal youth are evolving rapidly, but the institutional support systems to nurture and actualise these aspirations remain inadequate. Addressing the interlinked issues of gender, economic inequality, and rural marginalisation is essential to realising the full potential of education as a tool for empowerment and social justice among the tribal communities of Northeast India.

Identity, Culture, and Educational Experiences

Education among tribal communities is a vehicle for economic mobility and a space where identity, cultural values, and aspirations are actively negotiated. Among the Tangkhul and Maram tribes in Manipur, educational experiences are deeply embedded in the broader context of their cultural heritage, religious affiliations, and community structures.

Negotiating Traditional Values and Modern Schooling

Formal schooling in Manipur, across much of India, follows a standardized curriculum that is mainly urban-centric and culturally detached from the lived realities of tribal communities. For Tangkhul and Maram youth, this can lead to cultural dissonance. Traditional knowledge systems, which emphasise communal living, oral histories, respect for nature, and social responsibility, often find little resonance in the classroom. This disconnect can foster a sense of alienation, where students are pressured to adopt external values at the expense of their indigenous identity.

The medium of instruction in most schools—English, Hindi, or Meitei—poses a significant challenge for tribal students, whose mother tongues are typically not used in formal education. Language barriers contribute not only to poor comprehension and academic performance but also to identity erosion. The absence of mother-tongue instruction diminishes students' confidence and weakens their cultural roots, especially in the early learning years.

Mainstream curricula rarely incorporate tribal histories, cultural practices, or indigenous worldviews, leading to a homogenised understanding of Indian society that marginalises tribal experiences. This invisibility in textbooks and classroom discussions may inadvertently convey that tribal cultures are backwards or irrelevant, reinforcing inferiority complexes and weakening self-perception among tribal youth.

Despite these challenges, many tribal students find ways to navigate the educational system while holding onto their cultural identities. Young Tangkhuls and Marams increasingly adopt a hybrid identity, valuing modern education for the opportunities it brings while celebrating traditional festivals, speaking their native language at home, and participating in customary rituals. This ability to straddle two worlds reflects both resilience and adaptability.

Influence of Religion, Language, and Indigenous Worldviews

Christianity, the predominant religion among the Tangkhul and Maram communities, is pivotal in shaping educational aspirations and communal values. Missionary schools were among the first to introduce formal education in these areas, and the church continues to support learning through scholarships, hostels, and moral instruction. Christian values such as discipline, service, and humility align well with modern educational ideals and are often a source of motivation and social capital.

The increasing dominance of English and Meitei in education and administration presents a significant challenge for preserving indigenous languages. While some schools and community organisations are now promoting local language literacy, the lack of formal recognition and standardised orthographies hampers their integration into the education system. This linguistic erosion has long-term implications for cultural transmission and identity formation.

Tribal worldviews that emphasise harmony with nature, collective responsibility, and intergenerational knowledge transmission often clash with formal education's individualistic and competitive ethos. However, many community elders and educators advocate for synthesising these values, urging schools to incorporate elements of traditional ecological knowledge, customary law, and moral education rooted in tribal philosophy.

Community and Parental Roles in Shaping Educational Pathways

Parental involvement varies widely across and within tribal groups, often depending on educational background and socio-economic status. While educated parents in district towns may actively support their children's academic journeys, those in remote villages may view schooling with ambivalence, especially when immediate economic needs or traditional roles take precedence. However, even in these cases, many parents see education as a passport to upward mobility and prestige.

Community-level institutions such as village councils, church groups, and student unions play an instrumental role in promoting education. They often provide financial aid, organise tutoring or motivational events, and negotiate with government bodies for better school facilities. In some Tangkhul villages, church-run hostels have enabled students from distant hamlets to pursue secondary education in town centres.

Customary institutions, such as village elders' councils or traditional courts, typically operate outside formal education. However, in some instances, they engage in educational advocacy, mediating conflicts involving school dropout cases or promoting values such as discipline and social responsibility. Their influence, though indirect, remains significant in shaping the moral and cultural context within which education is pursued.

Institutional and Policy Frameworks

Government and NGO Interventions in Tribal Education

- **Government Schemes:** Detail relevant schemes and policies by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Ministry of Education, and Manipur State government (e.g., Eklavya Model Residential Schools, scholarships for ST students, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan).
- **NGO Initiatives:** Highlight the contributions of local, national, and international NGOs in supplementing government efforts, particularly in remote areas or in providing specialised support (e.g., vocational training, bridge courses).
- **Impact Assessment:** Briefly assess these interventions' perceived effectiveness and reach based on secondary literature.

Evaluation of educational policies and development schemes in Manipur

- **Policy Gaps:** Identify shortcomings in existing policies related to tribal education in Manipur (e.g., lack of focus on culturally relevant curriculum, insufficient funding for remote areas, teacher absenteeism).
- **Implementation Challenges:** Discuss issues in policy implementation at the grassroots level (e.g., bureaucratic hurdles, corruption, lack of awareness among beneficiaries).
- **Positive Outcomes:** Acknowledge any positive impacts of policies, such as increased enrollment or improved infrastructure in some areas.

Gaps between policy intent and grassroots realities

- **Mismatch:** Elaborate on how policy frameworks, often designed centrally, fail to account for the unique socio-cultural, linguistic, and geographical realities of the Ukhrul and Senapati districts.
- **Teacher Training:** Discuss the inadequacy of teacher training programs in equipping educators to handle diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- **Resource Allocation:** Examine discrepancies between planned resource allocation and actual delivery to remote tribal schools.
- **Community Participation:** Analyse how policies encourage and facilitate community participation in school governance and decision-making.

Challenges and Barriers

Structural Issues: Infrastructure, Teacher Shortages, Curriculum Relevance:

Tribal youth in Manipur, particularly in Ukhrul and Senapati, face significant structural barriers. Many schools in remote areas suffer from inadequate infrastructure—crumbling classrooms, poor sanitation, lack of electricity, and no internet connectivity. These conditions not only hinder the learning environment but also deter regular attendance. Teacher shortages remain a critical issue. Schools often operate with underqualified or insufficient staff, and teacher absenteeism is common. In many cases, teachers are not equipped to deal with multilingual and multicultural classrooms, impacting the quality of education delivered.

Socio-economic Constraints and Dropout Factors

Poverty is a primary reason for high dropout rates. Despite policies promoting free education, hidden costs such as uniforms, transport, and exam fees deter many families. Children are often pushed into labour to support household incomes, especially in farming communities. Food insecurity further affects concentration and regular school attendance. Another barrier is the distance to schools, especially for secondary and higher education.

Cultural Dissonance and Alienation in Mainstream Education

Mainstream education often imposes norms and values that conflict with tribal worldviews, causing students to feel alienated. The medium of instruction in

English or Meitei alienates those whose first language is Tangkhul, Maram, or other tribal dialects. This language gap contributes to academic underperformance and emotional detachment. Students also encounter subtle or overt forms of discrimination from peers and within the institutional culture. Such marginalisation may lead to a loss of self-esteem and cultural identity, with long-term psychological consequences.

Towards Inclusive and Equitable Social Development

Several initiatives across India have demonstrated the benefits of culturally responsive pedagogy. For example, the 'Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education' (MTB-MLE) programs in Odisha and Andhra Pradesh have significantly improved early-grade learning outcomes among tribal children by incorporating tribal languages and local knowledge systems into the curriculum. Successful models generally feature mother-tongue instruction, integration of local cultural content, active community involvement, and culturally trained educators. Adapting such models to Ukhrul and Senapati could help bridge cultural gaps and enhance student engagement. Tribal youth collectives, local governance bodies, and civil society organisations also play pivotal roles in advancing education.

Youth organisations like the Tangkhul Katamnao Saklong and the Maram Students' Union offer platforms for peer mentorship, career guidance, and political advocacy. Traditional village councils and statutory bodies such as the Autonomous District Councils can contribute more actively to school governance. At the same time, NGOs, church groups, and civil society actors continue to provide essential services like hostels, scholarships, and policy advocacy. Based on these insights, several policy and practice recommendations emerge: develop culturally inclusive curricula that reflect Tangkhul and Maram histories and values; institutionalize mother-tongue instruction in early grades with a gradual transition to state and national languages; implement teacher training focused on cultural sensitivity, local pedagogies, and multilingual strategies; encourage genuine community participation in school management; prioritize infrastructure development in remote schools, including digital access; expand access to scholarships; align vocational education with local economic opportunities such as agriculture, handicrafts, and eco-tourism; and address disparities through targeted interventions for girls and remote rural populations.

Suggestions

- Culturally Rooted Curriculum: Integrate Tangkhul and Maram cultural content, oral histories, and "agricultural knowledge into school syllabi to enhance engagement and relevance" (Battiste, 2002).
- Revitalisation of Indigenous Pedagogy: Consider reviving aspects of the dormitory system (e.g., Morung, Longshim) as supplementary educational spaces for mentoring, moral education, and skill acquisition (Shimray, 1967; Shimary, 1985).
- Policy Alignment with Indigenous Realities: Educational schemes must move beyond access to address alignment with indigenous epistemologies and non-hierarchical learning traditions (Midgley, 1995).
- Support for Indigenous Languages: Promote bilingual education in early schooling and support documentation and revitalisation of endangered languages like Maram.
- Gender-Responsive Approaches: Strengthen women's representation in educational leadership, introduce community-based gender training, and invest in scholarships for tribal girls.
- Alternative Livelihood and Vocational Programs: Embed livelihood-based education (e.g., Agro-entrepreneurship, craft skills) into secondary education frameworks to reduce migration-related educational disruptions.

Findings

- Education as Dual Space: Education among Tangkhul and Maram youth operates both as a tool for aspirational mobility and "as a site of cultural tension, where traditional customs intersect, and sometimes conflict, with state curricula and modern lifestyles" (Shimray, 1985; Horam & Roland, 2016).
- Role of Community Institutions: Traditional governance systems like the Pei (Maram) and Hanga (Tangkhul) continue to play important roles in mentoring youth, albeit informally. "These institutions reinforce values of solidarity and social responsibility, but often do not engage with formal schooling frameworks" (James, 2017).
- Gendered Realities: Despite the patriarchal structure, women significantly contribute to agriculture, education, and community life. "However, their

exclusion from decision-making bodies and educational leadership remains pronounced" (Brown, 1873; Shimray, 1967).

- Language Endangerment and Education: The use of Roman scripts, loss of indigenous languages (e.g., Maram dialect), and "the dominance of English/ Manipuri in schools contribute to linguistic and cultural erosion among the youth" (James, 2017; UNESCO, 2021).
- Economic and Institutional Constraints: High dropout rates are observed, especially among poorer households, "due to indirect schooling costs, lack of culturally sensitive curricula, and absence of vocational pathways" (SLBCNE, 2023; Philawon, 2025).

Conclusion

This review has shown that education is a critical site where tribal youth negotiate identity, opportunity, and social change. The interaction of identity, community, and institutional factors shapes educational outcomes in complex ways. While challenges such as poverty, cultural alienation, and infrastructural deficits persist, there are promising developments in inclusive educational practices and grassroots mobilisation.

Future research should include empirical studies through fieldwork in Ukhrul and Senapati involving students, families, and educators; qualitative approaches like ethnographies and life histories to document lived experiences; comparative studies examining tribal education in Manipur alongside other indigenous contexts in India or globally; impact assessments of existing interventions for long-term effectiveness; and participatory methodologies that centre the voices of tribal youth. These directions have important implications across multiple domains. In social work, professionals can advocate for the educational rights of tribal youth and support inclusive development through community outreach. Teachers and administrators should design and implement culturally relevant, inclusive curricula and pedagogy in education. In development policy, strategies must be context-sensitive and participatory, aligning with the socio-economic and cultural realities of tribal regions. Tribal education should be a foundational pillar for inclusive and sustainable development in Northeast India.

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