

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON TRIBAL EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY OF EKLAVYA MODEL RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS (EMRS)

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the role of Indian government policies in promoting educational equity among tribal communities, with a particular emphasis on the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) initiative. Scheduled Tribes (STs), who constitute about 8.6% of India's population, have historically experienced marginalization in multiple areas including education, healthcare, and access to basic infrastructure. Recognizing the deep-rooted educational disparities, the Government of India launched the EMRS scheme in 1997 under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to provide free, quality residential schooling to tribal students in remote areas. This paper critically analyses the policy framework, implementation structure, regional outreach, and educational outcomes of EMRS in enhancing tribal literacy and empowerment. Using data from government documents, census reports, budget allocations, and the Tribal Development Report 2022, this study highlights both progress and persisting challenges. While EMRS has improved access and enrollment, especially for tribal girls, gaps remain in terms of infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and regional imbalances between mainland and northeastern tribal regions. The paper also addresses concerns about cultural disconnect and high dropout rates among tribal students, despite increased budgetary support and program expansion. By situating EMRS within the broader context of affirmative action and inclusive development, the research advocates for a more culturally sensitive, community-integrated approach to tribal education. Recommendations include localized curriculum development, greater community participation, enhanced teacher training, and sustained investment. The study concludes that while EMRS is a step in the right direction, bridging the educational divide for tribal populations demands more inclusive and holistic policy efforts.

Keywords

Tribal Education, Government Policy, Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), Scheduled Tribes, Educational Inequality, Literacy Rate, Social Empowerment, India

Introduction:

India is home to the second-largest tribal population in the world, with Scheduled Tribes (STs) constituting approximately 8.6% of the nation's total population (Census of India, 2011). These communities, often referred to as Adivasis, have historically been marginalized from the mainstream socio-economic and educational development of the country. Their geographical isolation, economic disadvantages, and cultural differences have significantly limited their access to essential public services, especially quality education (Bharat Rural Livelihood Foundation [BRLF], 2020). The education gap between tribal and non-tribal populations has remained a matter of concern for policymakers. In response to this disparity, the Government of India has introduced various policy initiatives and affirmative action programs to uplift the educational status of tribal communities. One of the most impactful schemes is the **Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)** initiative, which was launched

in 1997 by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA, 2020). These schools aim to provide free, quality residential education to tribal students, particularly in remote and underdeveloped regions of the country. With over 400 functional schools and a target of expanding to 740 schools in the coming years, EMRS has become a cornerstone of India's tribal education strategy (Government of India, 2020). These schools not only offer formal academic education but also emphasize holistic development through co-curricular activities, skill-building, and gender inclusion. This research paper aims to analyze the role and effectiveness of EMRS in bridging the educational gap, improving literacy rates, and empowering tribal youth. The study further evaluates how well government policies align with the socio-cultural and developmental needs of Adivasi communities (Kumar, 2020).

Objectives of the Study:

1. To evaluate the impact of EMRS on tribal literacy and educational access.
2. To examine the geographical and demographic spread of EMRS across India.
3. To analyze policy implementation challenges and successes.
4. To identify disparities in educational attainment among tribal groups across regions.
5. To assess the budgetary and administrative commitments to EMRS.
6. To recommend strategies for improving tribal education through policy reform.

Review of Literature:

1. **Shah, G. (1990)** highlighted that tribal communities in India differ greatly in educational access. He classified them into Frontier and Non-Frontier Tribes, arguing that geographic isolation and differing state policies significantly influence how and whether tribal groups access formal education.
2. **Tribal Development Report (2020)** revealed critical education challenges: 48.2% of tribal children drop out before Class 8, and 62.4% before Class 10. These figures reflect major systemic barriers such as poverty, discrimination, and lack of quality education in tribal areas.
3. **Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020)** found that tribal communities have been historically excluded from quality education due to poor infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, and failure to provide culturally sensitive learning environments, limiting long-term educational success among Scheduled Tribes.
4. **Xaxa, V. (2001)** emphasized that tribal students often feel disconnected from the school system. This is because schools rarely include tribal languages, traditions, or worldviews, which leads to alienation, poor performance, and eventual dropout among tribal learners.
5. **Nambissan, G. B. (2000)** argued that prejudice within schools contributes to low confidence and participation among tribal students. Discrimination by teachers and peers, along with social stereotyping, discourages engagement, often pushing students to withdraw from learning activities.
6. **Govinda, R., & Bandyopadhyay, M. (2010)** evaluated post-RTE progress and found limited improvements in tribal education. Although enrollment rose, weak infrastructure, teacher absenteeism, and poor classroom practices continued to hinder effective learning outcomes in tribal-dominated areas.

7. **ASER Centre (2018)** reported that tribal children lag significantly behind national averages in reading and math skills. These learning gaps stem from poor early childhood education, lack of trained teachers, and instructional practices that do not suit tribal learners.
8. **Sujatha, K. (2002)** recommended using mother-tongue instruction and local cultural content to boost tribal students' learning. When students are taught in their first language and within familiar contexts, they show better understanding, regular attendance, and improved classroom participation.

Methodology:

The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive methodology, relying on secondary data sources. It draws insights from government reports such as the Ministry of Tribal Affairs publications and Census 2011 data, EMRS performance statistics, Union Budget allocations from 2019 to 2022, and relevant articles, policy briefs, and news portals.

Government Policy Framework for Tribal Education:

The Indian government has established a robust policy framework to promote education among Scheduled Tribes (STs), recognizing their historical marginalization and educational backwardness. Various constitutional provisions, centrally sponsored schemes, and policy initiatives aim to reduce dropout rates, improve infrastructure, and promote equitable learning opportunities. At the constitutional level, **Article 15(4)** empowers the State to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes, including Scheduled Tribes. **Article 46** of the Directive Principles of State Policy directs the State to promote the educational and economic interests of STs and protect them from social injustice and exploitation. Additionally, the **Fifth Schedule** of the Constitution provides for the administration and control of Scheduled Areas and Tribes, allowing for targeted educational and developmental programs (Government of India, 2021). One of the most significant initiatives under this framework is the **Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)** scheme, launched in **1997** by the **Ministry of Tribal Affairs**. The objective of the EMRS scheme is to provide quality middle and high school education to ST students in remote and underdeveloped tribal areas. These schools are designed on the lines of Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas and aim to bridge the rural-urban education divide for tribal children. Each school is equipped with facilities like hostels, libraries, and sports complexes, and caters to around 480 students from Class VI to XII (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020). EMRS institutions are intended not only to enhance literacy but also to promote all-round development and leadership among tribal youth. Another major policy development is the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**, which explicitly acknowledges the need for inclusive education and reduction in dropout rates among marginalized groups, including Scheduled Tribes. The policy promotes equitable access to education through localized curriculum, mother-tongue instruction in early grades, and the expansion of quality residential schooling like EMRS (Ministry of Education, 2020). NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of gender inclusion, cultural sensitivity, and community involvement to make education more accessible and meaningful for tribal learners. Together, these constitutional mandates, targeted schemes like EMRS, and progressive educational policies such as NEP 2020 represent a multi-layered approach by the government to address the educational disparities faced by India's tribal population.

Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS): Policy Overview:

Aspect	Details
Year Started	1997
Administering Body	National Education Society for Tribal Students (NESTS)
Current Functional Schools	401 EMRS (as of 2023)
Target	Every block with >50% ST population & at least 20,000 tribals
Enrollment	113,000+ students (57,000 girls)
Teachers Planned	38,800 teachers for 740 schools by 2026
Budget Allocation	₹5,943 crore in FY 2023–24

Impact Analysis:**Positive Outcomes of Government Initiatives for Tribal Education**

Government interventions such as the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) and other tribal welfare schemes have led to several notable positive outcomes in the realm of tribal education across India. These outcomes reflect the impact of sustained efforts to improve accessibility, quality, and inclusivity of education for Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities.

One of the most significant achievements has been the **increase in tribal student enrollment**, particularly in the upper primary to senior secondary levels. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020), the number of tribal students accessing secondary and higher secondary education has grown steadily over the past two decades. This shift indicates improved awareness among tribal families and a growing trust in residential schooling models like EMRS, which offer structured academic pathways.

Another key success is the **provision of free residential education**, including nutritious meals, uniforms, textbooks, and learning resources. This holistic support system helps remove common economic barriers that tribal students face, especially in remote areas. Residential schooling also ensures regular attendance and reduces the burden on families, who might otherwise be unable to support their children's education due to poverty or migration (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020).

Tribal students have also begun to **perform better in national and state-level examinations**. Reports indicate a gradual increase in pass percentages, particularly in institutions like EMRS, where students receive targeted coaching, exposure to competitive exams, and access to extracurricular opportunities. For instance, EMRS students have qualified in competitive tests such as JEE, NEET, and Olympiads, reflecting an improvement in both academic and skill-based competencies (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Importantly, these efforts have also contributed to an **improved gender ratio in tribal education**. Nearly 50% of enrolled students in EMRS are girls, a figure that reflects increased female participation and a shift in social attitudes toward girls' education among tribal communities. This trend aligns with the broader goals of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes gender equity and inclusivity in educational access (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Challenges

Despite the numerous initiatives like the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), tribal education in India continues to face persistent challenges. One major concern is the **high dropout rate** among tribal students, even though free residential facilities, meals, and educational materials are provided. According to the *Tribal Development Report* (2022),

dropout rates remain as high as 48.2% before Class 8 and 62.4% before Class 10, reflecting deep-rooted socio-economic and psychological barriers.

Inadequate infrastructure and shortage of trained teachers in several EMRS institutions hinder the learning environment. While some schools are well-equipped, others lack basic amenities such as science labs, libraries, or even regular electricity, limiting students' academic growth (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020).

There also exists a **cultural disconnect** between the tribal communities and formal education systems. Most tribal children come from backgrounds rich in oral traditions and indigenous knowledge, which is not acknowledged in mainstream curricula. This alienation discourages continued participation.

Lastly, there is **uneven development** across regions. While tribal populations in the Northeast show higher literacy rates due to better schooling infrastructure, the **mainland tribal belts**—such as those in central India—still struggle with lower educational indicators and inadequate outreach.

Comparative Regional Literacy Analysis:

Region	Tribal Literacy Rate	National Average	Literacy Gap
Northeast (e.g., Mizoram)	>80%	73%	Negative gap
Odisha	~49%	73%	24%
Tamil Nadu	~45%	80%	35%
Jharkhand	~57%	73%	16%

Budgetary and Administrative Commitment:

While ₹2,000 crore was sanctioned in previous years, the 2023–24 budget saw a significant increase to ₹5,943 crore. This signals stronger intent but raises questions on timely disbursement, monitoring, and capacity-building at the local level.

Recommendations:

In recent years, the Government of India has demonstrated a stronger financial commitment toward tribal education, particularly through the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) scheme. While earlier budgets allocated approximately ₹2,000 crore annually, the **Union Budget 2023–24 marked a significant increase**, with ₹5,943 crore earmarked for EMRS development and operations (Ministry of Finance, 2023). This threefold increase reflects the government's intent to scale up educational outreach in tribal areas by expanding infrastructure, improving residential facilities, and enhancing academic resources. However, the rise in budgetary allocations also brings to light **critical administrative challenges**. These include the **timely disbursement of funds**, **efficient utilization at the grassroots level**, and the **monitoring of project execution**. Additionally, **capacity-building among school administrators, teachers, and local officials** remains a bottleneck in translating funds into measurable educational outcomes.

Conclusion:

The Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) initiative represents a significant milestone in advancing **equitable educational access** for India's tribal population. While the policy framework is strong, the **real impact depends on effective implementation**, which must be guided by cultural sensitivity, sustained funding, and **participatory governance**.

Addressing the educational disparities requires more than just constructing schools—it demands **inclusive pedagogy**, **mother-tongue instruction**, continuous **teacher training**, and **deep-rooted community engagement**. Bridging the gap involves creating environments where tribal children not only learn but thrive in ways that reflect and respect their identities. The ultimate goal should not be limited to improving literacy rates but achieving **holistic empowerment**, enabling tribal youth to participate equally in India's socio-economic development.

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