

Overcoming Educational Barriers: A Study on Tribal Learners in Shopian District, Jammu Kashmir

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Abstract:

This paper presents an in-depth exploration of the educational challenges faced by tribal children in the Shopian district of Jammu & Kashmir, with particular emphasis on issues related to accessibility, quality, and systemic inequities. Although the government has launched various schemes and policies promoting inclusive education, their on-ground effectiveness in tribal-dominated regions remains limited. The tribal communities in this region continue to grapple with lower literacy rates, high dropout levels, and poor academic outcomes compared to their non-tribal counterparts. Key barriers identified include inadequate physical infrastructure such as insufficient school buildings, lack of basic amenities (toilets, electricity, digital tools), and the absence of trained teachers sensitive to tribal cultures. Seasonal migration of families for livelihood further disrupts children's education cycles, leading to learning discontinuity. Language plays a major role, as most tribal children speak regional dialects at home, which are often not the medium of instruction in schools, creating an early learning gap. Moreover, a cultural disconnect exists between the formal schooling system and the traditional tribal way of life, which leads to low motivation and limited parental support for formal education. The study is based on mixed-methods research, incorporating first-hand field observations, in-depth interviews with teachers, parents, and education officials, and a critical analysis of existing reports and statistical data. This multi-perspective approach helped uncover gaps not just in access but also in curriculum relevance, pedagogy, and community engagement. Findings suggest that mere infrastructure development or policy announcements are not sufficient. There is an urgent need for context-specific strategies that are culturally inclusive and community-driven. The study recommends sustained efforts in teacher training focused on tribal contexts, development of bilingual teaching materials, flexible school calendars accommodating migration patterns, and active involvement of tribal leaders in educational planning. In conclusion, the research advocates for a holistic model of tribal education reform—one that harmonizes formal education with the cultural realities of tribal life. Only through participatory, long-term interventions can educational equity be ensured for tribal children in Shopian and similar underrepresented regions.

Keywords: Tribal Education, Accessibility, Language Barriers, Seasonal Migration, Inclusive Learning, Teacher Sensitization, Rural Schooling, Gender Disparity, Educational Equity.

INTRODUCTION:

Jammu and Kashmir remains the only Indian state with a Muslim-majority population, where, as per the

Census 2011, approximately 68.3% of residents practice Islam. Hinduism is followed by 28.4% of the population, while smaller segments adhere to Sikhism (1.9%), Buddhism (0.9%), and Christianity (0.3%). The state is home to several tribal communities dispersed throughout the Himalayan terrain of Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh, contributing to its rich ethnic and cultural diversity. These tribal groups embody the traditional and authentic cultural fabric of the region. According to the Census, Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute 11.9% of the total population of Jammu and Kashmir. There are twelve recognized tribes in the region, namely Gujjars, Bakarwals, Balti, Beda, Bot (Boto), Brokpa (Drokpa), Changpa, Garra, Mon, Purigpa, Gaddi, and Sippis. Among them, Gujjars form the largest tribal group with a population of 7,63,806, representing 69% of the total ST population. The second-largest tribe is Bot, with 96,698 members, followed by the Bakarwals numbering 60,724.

Prior to 1989, the state did not officially recognize any Scheduled Tribes. It was only after the Constitution (Jammu & Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1989, that eight communities received ST status, and later in 1991, four more—Gujjar, Bakarwal, Gaddi, and Sippi—were included through an amendment. These twelve tribes, granted ST status, include Balti, Beda, Bot (Boto), Brokpa (Drokpa, Dard, Shin), Changpa, Garra, Mon, Purigpa, Gujjar, Bakarwal, Gaddi, and Sippis. Out of these, eight tribes such as Balti, Beda, Bodh or Bot, Brokpa, Champa (Changpa), Garra, and Mon are predominantly located in the Ladakh region. Official enumeration of all twelve ST groups was done for the first time in the 2001 Census.

The majority of the ST population, around 95.3%, resides in rural areas. District-wise, Kargil reports the highest ST concentration at 88.3%, followed by Leh at 82%, Poonch at 40%, and Rajouri at 33.1%. Of the total ST population, Gujjars remain the most numerous (69.1%), while Balti, Purigpa, and Gaddi collectively account for 10.2%. The remaining tribes—Sippi, Changpa, Mon, Garra, and Beda—comprise a marginal share of 1.9%, with Beda being the smallest group (population: 128). Gujjars and Bakarwals, both traditionally nomadic, together form the third largest community in the state, constituting 8.1% of the total population, as per the 2001 Census. These communities are found across all three regions of Jammu and Kashmir: Jammu (including Jammu, Kathua, Udhampur, Poonch, Rajouri), the Kashmir Valley (Srinagar, Baramulla, Kupwara, Pulwama, Shopian, Budgam, Anantnag), and Ladakh (notably Kargil).

The name "Gujjar" has historical roots in Indian literature, appearing as early as the 7th century A.D. Some theories suggest it stems from "Gauchar," where "Gau" means cow and "Char" means graze, reflecting their pastoral background. Traditionally nomadic, many Gujjars have now transitioned into settled agricultural lifestyles, residing in foothill villages and cultivating land. Some remain semi-nomadic transhumants who engage in both farming and animal rearing, migrating seasonally to higher pastures such as Pir Panjal during summers, and returning to the plains in winters.

Despite numerous governmental efforts, the lifestyle and worldview of Gujjars remain largely unaffected by modernization. A small portion has embraced scientific approaches and modern agriculture, while the majority continues to follow traditional ways. Gojri and Bakarwali are the main languages spoken by Gujjars and Bakarwals. According to the 2011 Census, Jammu and Kashmir recorded a literacy rate of 68.74%. The state's education system is categorized into primary, higher secondary, college, and university levels. However, the literacy rate among the Scheduled Tribes stands at a mere 37.5%, which is significantly lower than the national average of 47% for STs. Male and female literacy rates among STs (48.2% and 25.25%, respectively) are also well below national ST averages (59.2% for males and 34.8% for females). The Gujjars and Bakarwals continue their traditional transhumant lifestyle, moving seasonally with livestock across various altitudes of the northwestern Himalayas. Their livelihoods are

closely linked to seasonal pastures, with differing climatic conditions in summer and winter dictating their migration patterns.

Despite the internal diversity in their histories, languages, livelihoods, and social interactions, nearly 10 crore Indians are part of the Scheduled Tribe population. India recognizes 705 distinct tribal groups, each with its unique language, often differing from the dominant regional tongue (Govinda, 2002). Tribes are far from being a homogeneous community; even within the same village, different tribes maintain distinct identities. Over the past 65 years, their experiences have included displacement, land alienation, marginalization, and both state-sponsored and retaliatory violence. Across all development indicators, tribal communities consistently rank at the bottom. Economic hardship and limited access to essential services, particularly education, continue to plague these populations. Recognizing this, the government has implemented numerous educational initiatives post-independence, such as post-matric scholarships, free uniforms and textbooks, educational material support, residential schools, relaxed admission criteria, career counseling, and remedial coaching—all aimed at improving educational outcomes for tribal children.

Exploratory Goals and Research Framework:

1. To assess the current educational status of tribal communities in the Shopian district.
2. To examine the key challenges and pedagogical difficulties faced while educating tribal children in the region.
3. To explore the underlying causes contributing to the educational backwardness among tribal populations.

Understanding Educational Disparities in Tribal Populations:

Scheduled Tribes (STs), recognized as one of the most vulnerable segments of society, are a distinct target group within India's development planning framework. Over the years, consistent efforts by both central and state governments have led to a notable rise in the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of ST children at the elementary level. Interestingly, in several regions, this increase has outpaced that of non-tribal children. However, despite this progress, dropout rates among ST students remain alarmingly high. At the primary level, 35.6% of ST children drop out of school, compared to 27% among their non-tribal peers. This gap widens further at the elementary stage, where the dropout rate for ST students stands at 55%, against 40.06% for non-STs (Statistics for School Education, 2010–2011).

In the Shopian district of Jammu and Kashmir, several interrelated factors contribute to this high dropout rate. These include the unavailability of sufficient teaching-learning materials, inconsistency in the provision of mid-day meals, limited engagement of Village Education Committees (VECs) in school-related activities, widespread poverty, and parental illiteracy. These findings hold critical significance for the formulation and implementation of educational interventions in Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) areas across the country.

As Pati and Panda (2010) observe, inadequate school infrastructure and a shortage of qualified teachers lead to discouraging experiences for students in educationally backward districts. Children from socio-economically marginalized groups such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes often experience fear or alienation in school environments. This emotional disconnect, coupled with an unengaging school experience, gradually pushes them away from formal education. Nevertheless, the introduction of various supportive measures—such as free uniforms, textbooks, and residential facilities—has contributed to

improved enrolment rates among SC and ST students, including girls. However, challenges persist. Teacher absenteeism in remote tribal schools remains an issue, and a gender gap in enrolment continues, with fewer girls attending school compared to boys in the same area.

Underlying Challenges in Tribal Education: Beyond Identity

The educational challenges faced by tribal children are not limited to their tribal identity alone but are intricately linked to the overall quality and accessibility of education. While being part of a tribal community often correlates with socio-economic disadvantage—such as poverty and residence in remote or underdeveloped areas—the issues they face are rooted in a combination of factors. Thus, their situation is shaped not merely by their tribal status, but by a network of interconnected constraints.

Research and empirical observations indicate that tribal children generally possess the essential cognitive abilities and psychological readiness required for active participation and success in formal schooling. However, their low academic achievement is frequently attributed to school-related variables that affect both tribal and non-tribal students alike. The underperformance of tribal students, especially in primary education, stems from a range of contributing elements which can be broadly classified into two categories:

- (i) Internal factors – including school environment, teaching quality, and curriculum relevance; and
- (ii) External factors – such as poverty, parental illiteracy, cultural disconnects, and geographic isolation.

Internal Systemic Barriers to Tribal Education

Internal factors refer to challenges rooted within the education system itself—such as curriculum content, pedagogy, language of instruction, incentive structures, and the limited engagement of the tribal community in educational planning. These barriers can be mitigated through well-designed, contextually relevant interventions. Two such critical dimensions are discussed below:

1. Language of Instruction and Communication Gaps

Tribal children, particularly in District Shopian, encounter significant hurdles related to language during their foundational years (Classes I–IV). These children predominantly speak their native dialects and have limited exposure to the state languages—English, Urdu, and Kashmiri—used in classroom instruction. As a result, they struggle to comprehend lessons, interact with peers and teachers, and engage meaningfully with educational content.

Government schools in the district adopt English as the medium of instruction, guided by the textbooks prescribed by the State Board of School Education. This approach has proven problematic, as both students and teachers report difficulties in teaching and learning through a language unfamiliar to the children. The textbooks are heavily text-centric and linguistically demanding, contributing to a lack of interest among learners and frustration among teachers.

2. A teacher aptly noted:

“The books designed by the State Board are not up to the mark. Teaching from them requires substantial training and experience. Students struggle with the concepts because of the English language, which they have minimal exposure to. A Class 8 student cannot understand English unless provided with continuous and early exposure.”

3. Teacher Training, Sensitization, and Pedagogical Gaps

Teachers serving in tribal or scheduled areas are often not from the same ethnic background as their students. This cultural disconnect can adversely affect the learning environment. When tribal teachers—

especially from the same community—are present, student engagement and retention tend to improve due to better cultural alignment and empathy.

However, even tribal teachers require specialized training—not only in academic content, but also in culturally sensitive pedagogical practices. Attitudinal transformation through training is essential to overcome subconscious biases and stereotypes. During group discussions with primary school teachers in **District Shopian, the following perceptions were found to be prevalent:**

1. Tribal children are docile.
2. Their language holds no societal power.
3. Tribal languages are not used outside their communities.
4. Such languages are viewed as narrow, unrecognized, and inferior to dominant regional tongues.
5. Girls from tribal communities lag behind boys in comprehension.

These perceptions highlight the urgent need for sustained teacher orientation and sensitization. Research consistently shows that teacher motivation has a greater impact on classroom outcomes than mere competence. Therefore, teacher training must not be a one-time event but a continuous process, integrating academic capacity building and inclusive pedagogical strategies.

3. Core Dimensions of Teacher Training and Pedagogical Enhancement:

Teacher training in tribal-dominated regions must go beyond conventional methods and address contextual realities. The following domains are critical for creating an inclusive, responsive, and effective learning environment for tribal children:

- **Training for Contextual Resource Utilization**

Teachers must be oriented in the use of local tribal dialects and indigenous materials for creating Teaching-Learning Materials (TLM).

Development of comprehensive resource training manuals is essential to facilitate effective classroom instruction.

Supplementary tools such as tribal language primers, picture dictionaries, teacher's handbooks, conversational charts, and self-learning resources can greatly assist educators.

Training should focus on interactive, learner-centered, and gender-sensitive teaching strategies, especially in multi-grade classroom settings common in tribal areas.

- **Transforming Teacher Attitudes Toward Tribal Learners:**

Sensitization programs must be implemented to help teachers recognize and value the cultural, cognitive, and behavioral strengths of tribal children.

Attitudinal reorientation should be a core component of teacher education programs.

Enhanced teacher motivation, supported through ongoing professional development, can significantly boost tribal children's interest and engagement in education.

- **Promoting Participatory and Experiential Pedagogy**

Teaching methods should encourage inquiry-based learning where students are motivated to ask questions, undertake projects, participate in educational tours, and engage in hands-on activities outlined in the curriculum.

Continuous and formative assessment practices should replace one-time examinations to support holistic learning.

The teaching process should aim to nurture not only intellectual but also social, moral, and spiritual growth in students.

The Need for Integrated Curriculum and Material Training

Developing a culturally relevant curriculum is ineffective if teachers are not equipped to use the corresponding materials effectively. Studies underscore the importance of training teachers in the use of tools such as dictionaries, flashcards, and innovative TLMs. Effective implementation of curriculum reform is inextricably linked to sustained and practical teacher training.

3. Fostering Community Engagement and Local Ownership in Tribal Education

Sustainable improvement in tribal education necessitates the active involvement of the local community. Engaging tribal youth and educators from within the community as change agents and role models can significantly enhance both educational participation and outcomes. Empowering the community to take genuine ownership of educational initiatives builds long-term commitment and fosters accountability. The following components are vital for nurturing effective community engagement:

- **Building Trust and Local Capacity**

It is essential to earn the trust of local stakeholders by engaging with them respectfully, learning from their lived experiences, and educating them about the broader goals of the educational initiatives.

Developing the leadership capacity of tribal youth and community influencers contributes to the sustainability of educational reforms.

- **Ensuring Active Community Involvement**

Community members can play active roles in a variety of school-related activities such as needs assessments, infrastructure development (e.g. construction of school buildings), and documentation of indigenous knowledge—including local folklore, history, and traditional medicine.

Genuine participation also includes facilitating interaction among stakeholders through motivational efforts and collaborative planning processes.

- **Empowering Communities for Educational Accountability**

A multi-pronged strategy is needed to empower communities to not only support but also advocate for equitable and quality education services from governmental bodies.

Empowerment includes building awareness, developing collective voice, and enabling local communities to hold education systems accountable.

4. Role of Incentives in Enhancing Tribal Education

The provision of incentives—such as free school uniforms, textbooks, learning materials, and mid-day meals—has long been considered a strategic intervention to improve school attendance among Scheduled Tribe (ST) children. While these measures can be essential, particularly for first-generation learners, they are not standalone solutions for ensuring access to quality education.

Evidence suggests that such incentives have positively influenced enrolment figures, especially among Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students, including girls. Facilities like boarding, lodging, and health services—often provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—have helped create an integrated approach to educational development. For example, several NGO-run education programs offer free meals not only to boost enrolment and retention but also to address the pressing issue of child malnutrition. However, there is a growing consensus that the ultimate motivation for school attendance must be the value of education itself, rather than the incentives.

In recent years, leading NGOs such as Pratham and Chinara have shifted from providing individual incentives to supporting school- and community-level educational initiatives across various districts of

Jammu & Kashmir. Their focus now includes strengthening teacher support and training, deploying additional educators, revitalizing school management committees, and implementing remedial education programs. These organizations actively collaborate with local education department officials and school faculty to enhance the overall functionality and effectiveness of the schools.

Influence of External Factors on Tribal Education

External factors—those situated beyond the immediate structure of the education system—play a significant role in shaping the educational outcomes of tribal children. These factors include geographical isolation, gender-based discrimination, and socio-economic challenges like parental migration. Effective educational programs must address these multifaceted challenges through inclusive and context-specific interventions.

1. Geographical Barriers and Educational Disadvantage

Children from tribal regions, especially in the remote areas of District Shopian, often experience lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates compared to their urban counterparts. While the number of educational institutions in rural and tribal belts has increased, various logistical and socio-economic barriers continue to hinder access. Factors such as inadequate transportation, limited financial support to families, and the hidden costs of schooling reduce the regularity of attendance and school retention.

Moreover, the quality of education in these rural schools tends to be compromised due to a lack of diversified curriculum options, limited recreational infrastructure, and insufficient learning materials. These geographical and infrastructural constraints exacerbate the disparities between students from rural tribal backgrounds and those from urban or municipal areas.

2. Gender Disparity in Educational Access

Gender-based inequality remains a pressing issue in the tribal communities of Shopian and beyond. Tribal girls, in particular, face systemic disadvantages at all educational levels. Cultural norms, domestic responsibilities, and socio-economic pressures frequently limit their participation in schooling. Data indicates that approximately 37% of tribal girls aged 7–14 are out of school, compared to 26% among girls from non-tribal majority communities (**Late Lecture Manzoor Ahmad, Action Research Project**). In many households, girls are expected to care for siblings or assist with domestic chores, and are often withdrawn from school prematurely—some never return to complete their education. This leads to a vicious cycle of poverty, early marriage, and exclusion from economic opportunities.

To counteract this imbalance, both governmental and non-governmental organizations have launched targeted initiatives that promote gender-sensitive, life-relevant education. Notable among these are the National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL) and the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme, which focus on improving enrolment, retention, and quality of education for girls in tribal-dominated regions.

Ensuring Access to Education in Tribal Regions

Physical access to education in tribal regions is frequently constrained by challenging geographical terrain, dispersed populations, remoteness of habitations, and the nomadic or migratory lifestyles of certain tribal communities. To address these challenges, various state governments have implemented targeted interventions in tribal and tribal-dominated areas. Among these, alternative education models under the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan have proven effective in reaching out to out-of-school children residing in difficult terrains.

In such contexts, non-formal education often becomes a practical and culturally relevant substitute for formal schooling. It is particularly instrumental in addressing the needs of children who have dropped out due to socio-economic hardships or cultural practices, as well as those who never entered the formal education system due to lack of interest or relevance in the curriculum. As highlighted in the action research conducted by Late Lecturer Manzoor Ahmad, many of these children live in areas where schools are technically accessible but choose not to attend due to systemic and motivational barriers.

Non-formal educational approaches offer flexibility and scope for innovation. Unlike rigid conventional models, they allow for contextual adaptation in terms of teaching methods, content design, learner engagement, and assessment strategies. These programs are designed to bridge learning gaps by developing essential competencies appropriate to the child's age and context, using a condensed curriculum delivered at a flexible pace. This model serves as a viable pathway for reintegrating marginalized children into the educational fold.

Impact of Migration and Socioeconomic Status on Education

Children of migrant workers are often denied basic rights, including the right to education. Seasonal migration, driven by environmental degradation, drought, and chronic poverty, is a harsh reality in many parts of the country, particularly in tribal regions. These migrations usually involve landless, unskilled, and illiterate populations, with tribal communities forming a significant portion. Education becomes a major casualty in such scenarios. As families move for several months each year in search of livelihoods, children often accompany their parents, resulting in school dropouts and premature entry into the labor force. For instance, in some tribal villages of District Shopian, around 200 children aged 9 to 15 years migrate annually to nearby towns and villages for work, missing months of schooling.

Given the inevitability of migration in such socio-economic conditions, education strategies must adapt accordingly. Innovative interventions such as seasonal hostels, mobile schools, residential facilities, and training for migrant mothers can help keep children in the villages and ensure continuity in learning. In cases where migration cannot be prevented, establishing temporary non-formal learning centers or collaborating with schools at the destination sites can offer feasible alternatives. Any meaningful education initiative in these areas must focus on minimizing the educational disruption caused by migration and ensuring that children are not forced to drop out due to their families' livelihood needs.

Socioeconomic status (SES), on the other hand, plays a critical role in determining educational attainment. SES is typically assessed based on a combination of educational qualifications, occupational status, and family income. When applied in the context of student achievement, SES often reflects the overall socio-economic condition of the child's family. Numerous studies have consistently shown a strong correlation between low SES and poor educational outcomes. Children from disadvantaged families tend to face a range of challenges, including:

1. Lower levels of literacy, numeracy, and comprehension;
2. Higher dropout rates and reduced chances of completing school;
3. Lower participation in higher education and professional courses;
4. Greater likelihood of exhibiting problem behaviors such as absenteeism;
5. Reduced access to advanced subjects like science and mathematics;
6. Increased academic struggles and a more negative attitude towards schooling;
7. Difficult transitions from school to the labor market and limited employment opportunities.

8. Addressing these deeply rooted issues requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach that combines economic support, parental awareness, inclusive curriculum design, and responsive educational infrastructure tailored for tribal and low-income communities.

Social Barriers and the Need for Inclusive Classroom Dynamics

Tribal children often display signs of social withdrawal and shyness when placed in mainstream classrooms, especially in comparison to their non-tribal peers. Their limited exposure to diverse social settings contributes to their hesitation in initiating conversations or participating in classroom activities. Many of them tend to form exclusive sub-groups within the class, making it difficult for teachers to engage with the entire class uniformly. This pattern is more frequently observed among tribal boys than girls. A sense of social inferiority often persists among these children, hampering their classroom integration and learning experience.

A teacher expressed this challenge, stating:

“These children are not as active as other children; they usually occupy back lines in the classroom. Teacher has to do a lot to make them respond in classroom. A group of three or four of these like-minded students, usually among boys, part themselves from rest of the class; which creates problems for teachers.”

Need for a Reduced Pupil-Teacher Ratio in Tribal Schools

Many educators have voiced concern about the pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) in tribal areas. In classrooms where the PTR is high, teachers face increased difficulty managing diverse learner needs, especially those of tribal children who require individualized attention and tailored pedagogical support. The challenges faced in these schools are distinct from those in urban or non-tribal settings, calling for a reassessment of the general PTR standards prescribed by government programs such as Samagrah. Tribal schools demand more personalized instructional time due to the unique socio-cultural and academic challenges tribal students face.

As one teacher observed:

“Compared to most non-tribal schools, the pupil-teacher ratio in our schools should be lower because we have to deal with different types of children. We currently have a high PTR. The ratio prescribed under Samagrah doesn’t apply here. Sometimes it becomes very difficult to teach even a few of these students. Each child has different interests and learning needs.”

Case Study: Liyakat Ahmad Paswal from the Gujjar Tribe

Liyakat Ahmad Paswal, a 15-year-old boy from Shalidoora village in Keller Block, Shopian district, exemplifies the challenges faced by tribal youth. His village, located about 20 kilometers from the district headquarters, is connected by a pucca, macadamized road. Liyakat began working at the age of 12 to support his family financially. For the past two years, he has worked in nearby villages in apple orchards, recruited through a local contractor. He typically spends two to three months a year at these job sites and earns around ₹10,000 per month. Liyakat’s family consists of four members. His father is a farmer, and his mother manages household duties. Due to financial hardships, he discontinued his education after completing class VII.

To address such issues, seasonal hostels have been introduced to prevent children from migrating with their families and help them continue schooling within their villages. Additional strategies include the establishment of short-term residential programs for children of migrant families, distribution of

educational incentives such as stationery, uniforms, and learning materials, and the creation of Ashram or residential schools. Innovative solutions such as deploying mobile teachers and setting up seasonal education camps are being used to reach nomadic communities. Some programs even help children reintegrate into their home schools after the migration season ends.

For instance, under Samagrah, nearly 90 seasonal learning centers are being operated in Zone Shopian and Zone Keegam, catering specifically to migratory children from Rajouri and Poonch districts. These interventions are critical in ensuring continuity in education despite the seasonal migration patterns.

Conclusion:

Education remains the most powerful tool through which individuals and communities can enhance their capabilities, overcome systemic barriers, and access better opportunities for holistic well-being. For Scheduled Tribe (ST) children, achieving a meaningful balance between preserving their unique cultural identity and integrating them into the mainstream education system is essential. This involves designing educational interventions that both affirm tribal heritage and promote academic success within formal schooling structures.

Presently, much of the education system caters predominantly to the needs of the dominant social groups. Therefore, deliberate investments must be made in creating inclusive support systems that facilitate smoother integration of tribal learners into the formal framework. These support mechanisms may include:

1. Incorporating both tribal and regional/state languages during pre-primary and primary education levels.
2. Developing contextually relevant tribal learning materials to supplement the curriculum.
3. Providing monetary and non-monetary incentives for teachers serving in tribal areas.
4. Tackling health and nutrition issues affecting tribal children to improve learning outcomes.
5. Enhancing community engagement by training tribal educators and mobilizing local youth.
6. Establishing transitional education centers to support the academic and cultural integration of tribal children.
7. Creating seasonal hostels and residential schools for children of migratory families to ensure uninterrupted education.
8. Appointing local staff in remote areas and increasing stipends for Bakarwal and Gujjar students. Local teachers, who are emotionally connected and familiar with the terrain and lifestyle, are better positioned to deliver meaningful education in such challenging contexts. While these internal educational interventions are vital, they only address part of the challenge. Based on the analysis of dropout and non-enrolment patterns and evidence from case studies, it is clear that greater philanthropic and systemic investment is also required outside the classroom. Building a stronger foundation for these children means extending support into their homes and communities, creating an ecosystem where education is both accessible and aspirational. Such efforts can unlock the true potential of tribal children and empower them to overcome the barriers they continue to face.

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