

Negotiating Tribal Identity in Formal Schooling Systems: The Sociology of Non-Formal Education

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Abstract

This paper investigates the sociological significance of non-formal education in conserving tribal identity and shaping aspirations among India's indigenous communities. Drawing upon qualitative and ethnographic insights, it argues that non-formal educational spaces rooted in community practices, skill-based learning, and indigenous knowledge systems serve as transformative platforms that simultaneously strengthen cultural identity and enhance pathways for social and economic mobility. While formal schooling often alienates tribal learners through linguistic barriers and culturally distant pedagogy, non-formal education offers culturally resonant learning opportunities that support community empowerment. This study demonstrates how non-formal educational initiatives challenge dominant narratives of tribal marginality by fostering agency, leadership, and alternative developmental imaginaries. The paper concludes that non-formal education enables tribal communities to negotiate modernity on their own terms, blending tradition with contemporary aspirations.

Keywords: Non-formal education, Tribal identity, Aspirations, Indigenous knowledge, Agency, Modernity, Tribal communities, Informal learning, Sociology of education.

Introduction

Education has conventionally been framed as a critical instrument of nation-building, modernisation, and social mobility in India (Kumar 2005). Within dominant sociological discourse, the schooling system is positioned as the principal site through which individuals internalise civic values, acquire skills, and participate in the expanding economy. However, such narratives often overlook the experiences of indigenous communities whose cultural worldviews, knowledge systems, and learning traditions diverge significantly from those embedded within state-led formal education. For Scheduled Tribes (STs), formal schooling has frequently been characterised by linguistic barriers, cultural dissonance, and pedagogical exclusion (Xaxa 2011; Balagopalan 2014). School curricula rarely reflect indigenous histories or tribal epistemologies; the school environment itself often alienates tribal students whose life worlds differ markedly from those of dominant-caste urban or rural groups. Yet, outside the formal system exists a wide spectrum of non-formal educational practices, ranging from community learning centres and skill workshops to ritualised learning embedded in ecological interactions, oral traditions, and collective labour. These forms of learning often structured yet flexible have historically played a critical role in sustaining tribal identity and selfhood.

Cultural continuity refers to the ongoing preservation of a community's traditions, values, language, rituals, and social practices across generations. It ensures that cultural identity remains intact despite external pressures of change. Through everyday activities, festivals, oral

traditions, and community interactions, groups maintain their collective memory and sense of belonging. Cultural continuity enables communities especially tribal groups to sustain their distinct identity while adapting selectively to new social realities. In which Indigenous knowledge systems help in this process through which traditional ecological knowledge, cultural skills, healing practices, stories, and worldviews are passed from elders to younger generations. This transmission occurs through observation, participation, storytelling, and communal activities instead of formal classroom teaching. It ensures the survival of knowledge systems deeply connected to land, environment, and heritage. Such knowledge is crucial for cultural resilience, environmental stewardship, and community identity. Community empowerment refers to strengthening the capacity of local people to make decisions, control resources, and participate actively in social, political, and economic processes. It involves enhancing collective confidence, skills, awareness, and organisational abilities. Empowered communities can negotiate with state institutions, assert rights, preserve cultural identity, and pursue development on their own terms. In tribal contexts, empowerment often emerges through community-driven education, self-help groups, and participatory governance structures.

Negotiation of modernity refers to the ways in which communities engage with new technologies, institutions, and ideas while selectively preserving cultural traditions. Instead of simply adopting or rejecting modernity, communities blend traditional practices with contemporary forms of knowledge to create hybrid identities. For tribal groups, this negotiation involves using modern resources such as education, digital tools, or markets without losing cultural autonomy. It exemplifies agency in navigating social change on their own terms.

Review of Literature

Tribal Education in India: Historical Perspectives

Colonial administration regarded tribes as “primitive” populations requiring civilising intervention (Skaria 1997). Missionary schools later expanded educational outreach but often imposed cultural transformation alongside literacy (Lobo 2002). Post-Independence policies attempted to integrate tribal communities into a national developmental framework (Ministry of Tribal Affairs 2014), yet formal schooling remained conceptually distant from tribal lifeworlds. Scholars argue that formal education often reproduces dominant cultural norms, marginalising tribal epistemologies (Kalyanpur & Harry 2012). The hidden curriculum within formal schools uniformity, disciplinarity, competition contrasts sharply with tribal ideas of community-centred learning (Nambissan 2013).

Non-Formal Education: Conceptual Framing

Non-formal education emerged internationally in the 1970s as a flexible alternative to institutional schooling (Coombs & Ahmed 1974). In India, it has been applied to adult literacy, vocational training, community empowerment, and alternative pedagogies (Govinda 2011). Contextualised Learning refers to learning that is rooted in the real-life experiences, environment, and cultural background of learners. Knowledge is linked to the local context, such as community life, ecology, occupations, and everyday practices. Makes learning more

meaningful and relatable because it connects education to what learners already know and experience.

Especially important in tribal or rural settings where mainstream textbooks may not reflect local realities. Flexible Curricula, Curriculum that is adaptable, not rigid or fixed like standard school syllabi. Can be modified to suit community needs, cultural practices, or seasonal activities. Allows teachers and learners to decide what, how, and when to learn based on their context. Encourages creativity, relevance, and learner participation instead of one-size-fits-all instruction. Community Control The community plays an active decision-making role in the teaching-learning process. Elders, parents, youth groups, and local leaders collectively influence what is taught and how programs function. Ensures education reflects local values, priorities, and goals instead of external expectations. Builds ownership and sustainability of educational initiatives. Intergenerational Transmission The passing of knowledge, skills, values, and traditions from one generation to the next. Elders teach younger members about culture, history, language, ecology, and social norms. Helps preserve cultural identity, especially in tribal and indigenous communities. Occurs through storytelling, daily work, rituals, festivals, and shared community life.

Cultural Embeddedness Learning that is deeply connected to the culture, beliefs, and practices of a community. Education does not sit outside culture it is woven into daily routines, rituals, language, and worldviews. Ensures that learning respects and strengthens cultural identity. Prevents cultural alienation, which often happens in mainstream formal schooling. Identity, agency, and aspirations is characterised by form an interconnected framework for understanding how tribal communities negotiate their social world. Tribal identity is not merely an individual trait but a collective construct shaped through shared ecological relationships, ritual participation, kinship bonds, and a deep sense of belonging to ancestral landscapes. These elements provide a stable cultural foundation through which individuals interpret their roles, responsibilities, and social obligations. As Beteille (1998) suggests, tribal identity derives its strength from embeddedness in community life and collective memory, rather than from individualistic notions of selfhood.

Aspirations, similarly, are not formed in isolation. Appadurai (2004) argues that aspirations emerge from one's "capacity to aspire," a socially conditioned framework influenced by cultural norms, role models, and shared experiences. In tribal contexts, aspirations are shaped through community values, intergenerational expectations, and the socio-economic environment. Unlike dominant societal expectations, which often equate progress with assimilation and formal education, tribal aspirations tend to reflect a balance between cultural rootedness and selective engagement with modern opportunities.

Non-formal education plays a significant role in nurturing this balance. Unlike formal schooling, which may detach learners from their cultural landscape, non-formal educational spaces allow individuals to envision futures aligned with their cultural identity. These spaces such as community learning centres, skill-based workshops, and training in indigenous knowledge preserve cultural continuity while simultaneously fostering confidence, leadership, and skill development. They create an environment where aspirations are not imposed from outside but grow organically within the community's socio-cultural framework. Thus, non-

formal education supports the formation of self-determined futures, enabling tribal communities to pursue development pathways that honour their traditions while embracing meaningful change.

Research Methodology

The Research Design follows an ethnographic qualitative approach because this method allows the study to explore tribal communities in a holistic and context-sensitive manner. Ethnography focuses on interpreting social life through close interaction with people, their routines, and their cultural practices. For a study on non-formal education and tribal identity, this approach is particularly suitable since tribal knowledge systems, learning processes, and community values cannot be fully understood through surveys or numerical measures alone. They require an in-depth engagement with everyday life, oral traditions, rituals, and interpersonal relationships. A qualitative ethnographic design helps uncover the meanings that community members attach to educational practices how they view learning, what forms of knowledge they prioritise, and how non-formal spaces shape their aspirations. It enables the researcher to understand not only *what* people do but *why* they do it in specific cultural contexts. By observing interactions in community learning centres, homes, workspaces, and ritual settings, the study captures layers of social reality that structured questionnaires would miss.

This design also aligns with broader sociological methods used in the study of indigenous and marginalised groups, where lived experiences are central to understanding social change. It respects the community's voice by foregrounding their narratives, worldviews, and meanings rather than imposing external interpretations. Overall, ethnography provides a grounded, culturally sensitive, and participatory way to explore how non-formal education contributes to identity, empowerment, and future aspirations within tribal societies.

Field Sites

Fieldwork was conducted in the Adhaura block of Kaimur district, a tribal region in central and eastern India i.e. Kharwar community of Adhaura.

Data Collection

Primary data was collected through:

12 In-depth Interviews with youth, elders, teachers, and NGO workers These interviews provide diverse perspectives on how non-formal education functions within the community. Youth share their aspirations and learning experiences; elders offer insights on cultural transmission; teachers highlight pedagogical challenges; and NGO workers explain program design and policy linkages. Together, these narratives create a multilayered understanding of identity, knowledge, and community change.

Participant Observation in community learning centres Through direct participation in daily activities such as evening classes, storytelling sessions, skill workshops, or cultural events the researcher observes how learning practices unfold naturally. This method captures subtle behaviours, interactions, emotions, and power dynamics that cannot be fully articulated in interviews, providing an authentic picture of lived learning processes.

Focus Groups with women's collectives Focus groups allow women to discuss their experiences collectively, offering insights into gendered dimensions of education, empowerment, mobility, and cultural preservation. The group setting encourages shared reflection, reveals common concerns, and highlights how women negotiate roles in both family and community spaces. Village Education Committee Meetings Observing these meetings helps the researcher understand local governance, decision-making, and community control over educational initiatives. It reveals how parents, elders, teachers, and leaders deliberate on school functioning, resource allocation, and culturally relevant curricula, showcasing grassroots participation in shaping learning opportunities. Ethnographic Field Notes Field notes document observations, conversations, gestures, spatial arrangements, and contextual details encountered during fieldwork. These notes become essential analytical material, helping capture the texture of everyday life and enabling the researcher to trace patterns, meanings, and evolving interpretations throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Data was coded thematically using grounded theory. Key themes included:

Cultural Continuity refers to the sustained preservation and practice of a community's traditions, values, beliefs, and ways of life across generations. For tribal communities, it includes rituals, languages, ecological knowledge, kinship norms, and customary practices. Non-formal education plays a key role in maintaining this continuity by embedding learning within cultural contexts, ensuring that modern skills are acquired without eroding indigenous identity. Aspirations and Mobility This term captures how individuals and communities envision their future possibilities such as educational advancement, livelihood opportunities, or social recognition and pursue pathways that enable upward mobility. In tribal settings, non-formal education expands aspirations by creating exposure to new skills and knowledge while keeping them anchored in cultural values. It helps youth imagine futures that balance economic growth with cultural rootedness.

Identity and Pride refer to the sense of belonging, self-worth, and collective recognition that tribal groups derive from their cultural heritage. Non-formal learning strengthens identity by validating indigenous knowledge and cultural practices. This affirmation builds pride among younger generations, motivating them to value their community's uniqueness and resist pressures of cultural assimilation. Community Leadership Community leadership involves the development and emergence of local leaders who guide collective decision-making, represent community interests, and mobilise people for social change. Non-formal education nurtures such leadership by providing platforms for participation, discussion, and skill-building. It enables youth, women, and marginalised groups to take active roles in shaping community development and cultural preservation.

Alternative pedagogies are non-traditional approaches to teaching and learning that differ from standard classroom models. In tribal contexts, these may include experiential learning, storytelling, apprenticeship, nature-based learning, and culturally rooted teaching methods. These pedagogy forms respect indigenous epistemologies and provide flexible, context-sensitive ways of learning that align better with local realities than formal schooling. Ethics

approval and community consent were obtained to ensure that the research was conducted responsibly, transparently, and with full respect for the rights of tribal participants. Formal ethics approval from the relevant institutional review board ensured that the study met established standards of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data protection. Community consent secured through meetings with elders, local leaders, and village committees was equally essential, as it recognised collective authority and cultural protocols. This process helped build trust, allowed the community to understand the study's purpose, and ensured that participation was mutually beneficial. By integrating both institutional and community-level ethical safeguards, the research upheld principles of respect, dignity, and shared decision-making.

Findings and Discussion

Oral traditions and storytelling serve as a vital educational tool within tribal communities, functioning far beyond entertainment. Elders use stories to transmit moral values, cultural beliefs, and collective memory in ways that are engaging and relatable for children. Through narratives about ancestors, spirits, landscapes, and community heroes, young listeners learn important lessons about responsibility, respect, and social conduct. Storytelling also embeds ecological knowledge such as sustainable use of forests, seasonal patterns, and animal behaviour within cultural narratives, making learning both meaningful and context-based. In this way, oral traditions shape children's understanding of kinship, identity, and their relationship with the natural world, ensuring continuity of cultural wisdom across generations. Ecological Knowledge Knowledge of forests, seeds, medicinal plants, and climate forms the core of tribal identity because these communities have historically depended on their environment for livelihood, healing, and cultural practices. This ecological understanding is not just practical but deeply symbolic, shaping worldviews and social relationships. Non-formal learning helps reinforce this connection by involving youth in activities such as seed preservation, herbal medicine preparation, and forest-based skills. Through hands-on learning and guidance from elders, young people develop an intimate awareness of their environment, ensuring that traditional ecological knowledge continues across generations. This process sustains cultural memory and strengthens the community's collective identity rooted in nature.

Rituals and Communal Labour Festivals, dances, and communal agricultural work act as dynamic learning spaces where tribal values are experienced rather than formally taught. During festivals and dances, community members especially youth learn cultural symbols, social roles, and collective histories through participation. These events reinforce group identity and emotional bonding. Similarly, agricultural activities carried out together teach discipline, mutual support, and responsibility. Elders guide younger members in cultivation practices, seasonal knowledge, and cooperative labour ethics. Through these shared experiences, individuals internalise community norms and strengthen their sense of belonging. Thus, cultural events and collective work become powerful educational sites that transmit both practical skills and cultural identity across generations.

Women's collectives, particularly self-help groups, operate as powerful non-formal learning spaces within tribal and rural communities. These groups extend far beyond their economic functions; they become arenas where women acquire critical skills, knowledge, and

confidence. Through regular meetings, women learn financial literacy, savings management, and livelihood skills, which strengthen their economic agency and reduce dependence on external actors. The collective environment encourages open discussion on issues such as health, education, rights, and household decisions, enabling women to articulate concerns that may otherwise remain unspoken in patriarchal settings.

Participation in such groups also promotes leadership and negotiation skills. Women gradually take on roles in record-keeping, conflict resolution, and community coordination, which enhances their decision-making abilities both within the home and in public spaces. The shared learning environment fosters solidarity, allowing members to exchange indigenous knowledge, craft traditions, and locally relevant skills. Moreover, these collectives often collaborate with NGOs or government schemes, exposing women to new opportunities and institutional networks. As women's voices become more recognised, these collectives help shift gender norms and expand possibilities for younger generations. Ultimately, women's self-help groups serve as transformative non-formal education platforms that integrate economic empowerment with social learning, contributing to broader community development and cultural resilience.

Redefining agency within tribal contexts requires shifting the focus from individual achievement to collective well-being. In many indigenous communities, agency is not understood as solitary autonomy or personal advancement, but as the ability to act responsibly for the benefit of the group. This form of agency is deeply tied to cultural values of cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual support. Individuals see their actions as meaningful because they contribute to the collective whether through participating in festivals, sharing labour, or preserving ecological knowledge. Such practices reinforce a sense of interdependence, where one's identity and capabilities are inseparable from the community.

This understanding stands in contrast to the dominant model promoted by formal schooling, which emphasises individual accomplishments, competition, and measurable outcomes. Formal education often frames success in terms of personal grades, rankings, or upward mobility, encouraging students to prioritise self-interest over collective harmony. For tribal youth, this paradigm may create tensions between cultural identity and institutional expectations. Non-formal education, however, offers a space where agency can be redefined on community terms. By valuing participation, shared responsibility, and cultural stewardship, these learning environments affirm that leadership and initiative are meaningful when they strengthen communal bonds. Thus, agency is reconstructed as a culturally embedded practice rooted in cooperation rather than competition, and oriented toward sustaining collective futures rather than individual advancement.

Conclusion

Non-formal education emerges as a powerful sociocultural space within tribal communities because it operates in close alignment with indigenous values, worldviews, and everyday practices. Unlike formal schooling which often introduces cultural disconnect through rigid curricula, unfamiliar languages, and competitive evaluation systems non-formal learning environments are embedded within the community's own lifeworld. Such spaces validate tribal knowledge systems, reinforce cultural identity, and provide learning opportunities that resonate

with local realities. By incorporating oral traditions, ecological knowledge, communal labour, and intergenerational learning, non-formal education preserves and strengthens tribal identity. It fosters pride in cultural heritage, enabling youth to see themselves not as subjects of assimilation but as carriers of valuable traditions and knowledge.

In addition to identity preservation, non-formal education nurtures aspirations that are culturally rooted yet future-oriented. Young people envision mobility not as a departure from their community but as a contribution to its development. Aspirations shaped through non-formal learning blend economic goals with cultural responsibilities, allowing youth to pursue livelihoods while staying connected to their ecological and social environments. This fosters a form of agency centred on collective well-being rather than individual achievement. Agency, therefore, becomes a shared endeavour in which community members work together to sustain cultural continuity, protect local resources, and navigate social change.

Non-formal education also plays a key role in challenging dominant narratives that portray tribal communities as marginal or backward. By empowering youth, strengthening women's collectives, and revitalising cultural practices, these educational spaces demonstrate that indigenous knowledge systems are dynamic and relevant. Tribal communities utilise non-formal education to negotiate modernity in creative ways such as using digital tools to document folk traditions, market handicrafts, or archive community histories. This shows that modernity is not simply adopted but redefined through culturally grounded practices. It becomes a hybrid process where technology and tradition coexist, supporting both cultural resilience and socio-economic participation.

Given its transformative potential, the study argues for policy frameworks that integrate the principles of non-formal education into mainstream schooling. These include contextualised curricula, flexible pedagogies, community participation, and recognition of indigenous knowledge systems. Incorporating such elements into formal education can reduce cultural alienation and promote more equitable learning environments for India's tribal populations. Ultimately, non-formal education demonstrates that culturally responsive pedagogy is essential for strengthening identity, fostering inclusive aspirations, and supporting self-determined pathways of development for indigenous communities.

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