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Leveraging Indigenous Cultural Assets to Enhance Scheduled Tribe Children's School Participation

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Abstract

In this paper an attempt has been made to understand the influence of culture on the Scheduled Tribe children belonging to ethnic communities studying in the schools, more particularly their participation in learning activities and the school related activities. The underlying assumption being that culture matters greatly in schooling activities and also has a positive influence on participation among these children belonging to ethnic groups in India. Taking a cue from the definition of culture by Tylor. E. B. (1871) which states that "Culture is a complex whole includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". However, the ethnic groups which are still in existence in India have remained isolated and backward although efforts are being made by educationists to assimilate and integrate these tribal communities to the main stream of the Indian society. The cultural theories of the noted anthropologists like Tylor and Malinowski thus becomes more relevant as cultural transmission remains the most important mode of retaining the culture of any society which may manifest in most of their day-to-day activities. These internalized cultural traits and the way the school activities articulated are in conflict, which the tribal children negotiate in the schools, in the event of failure to accommodate the school culture the tribal child avoids schooling and accepts the community form of life style which the child feels more relevant and easier to learn.

There is a need for the policy makers, planners and administrators to consider the cultural aspects specific to the ethnic tribal groups of the country while not only planning curriculum but

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also the way it is has to be transacted among these groups who have a different perception of schooling and education. The tribal groups mostly having exclusive schools do follow the pedagogy of the schools of the advantaged groups which do not take into account the cultural context of these ethnic groups, whether it is language, customs, moral, values, relationships, or artifacts and ecology of the society where they reside. Absence of cultural related factors in the schools can also be seriously affecting participation of the Scheduled Tribe children in schools resulting in low enrolment and participation and high dropouts. There is a need for taking into account the culture related factors of tribal groups where the schools are located and transact the pedagogy accordingly, which can definitely have a positive impact on participation of the children in the schools.

Key Words: Scheduled Tribes, Cultural Diversity, School Participation, Local Knowledge, Inclusive Practices.

Introduction

The Scheduled Tribes which are notified in India are over 700 with 75 Primitive Tribal Groups (MOTA,2023). The tribal population of the country as per the census is 10.43 crore constituting 8.6 per cent of the total population in the country. These ethnic tribal groups are culturally different from each other and are spread across the country and reside in different geographical conditions. Being heterogeneous, having a language and culture of their own and practicing different occupations make the Scheduled Tribe population of India unique. The literacy rate of the Scheduled Tribes in India has increased from 47 percent in 2011 to 70.1 per cent in 2020. This is a significant improvement from the 2011 Census data, but there is still a gap of about 19 percentage to 7 percentage points between the ST literacy rate and the overall literacy rate during the same period. The literacy rate of STs varies widely from state to state. Kerala has the highest literacy rate for STs, at 90.9%, while Bihar has the lowest, at 47.0%. There is also a significant gender gap in literacy rates among STs. The literacy rate for ST males is 65.4%, while the literacy rate for ST females is 54.7% (Gol, 2011 and 2021).

Since independence several policies and plans have been made for the development of the Scheduled Tribes in India in order to integrate and assimilate them in to the mainstream of the Indian society. However, the development is moving with a very slow pace among the Scheduled Tribes in the country resulting in high dropout rates and low retention of the Scheduled Tribe children in the schools. Although there are some regional exceptions with some of the North Eastern states having Scheduled Tribes with higher literacy rates and higher participation in the schools but the Scheduled Tribes in most of the other regions of the country are still lagging behind in education as well as their development.

Although education in the country has remained a state subject with autonomy to the states in formulating and adapting the pedagogy and type of education which they deem useful to the citizens belonging to the particular region or state, the efforts have only shown evidence of

marginal educational development among the Scheduled Tribes residing in the respective regions and states. The state governments have created separate departments to look at the development and welfare of the Scheduled Tribes within the states and some of the states have adapted a variety of schemes of development in the state plans as well. In addition, to the efforts which are being made by the state governments, the central government has also envisaged a variety of schemes covering education and development of the Scheduled Tribes in the country.

In this paper the focus of discussion is that of the influence of the schools in educating the Scheduled Tribe children in the country by taking into account the cultural factors in order to improve the participation of Scheduled Tribe children in the schools. The main questions which are addressed are:

1. Why the schools are not attracting the Scheduled Tribe children?
2. What are the reasons for not attracting the Scheduled Tribe children to schools?
3. Why the idea of schooling does not make them happy – is its linguistic barriers or non-practicing of cultural and community related factors in the schools?
4. Can the cultural factors be incorporated into the schooling?
5. What measures can be taken to make the functioning of schools better?

Tribal Groups, Habitations and Access to School Facilities

There are over 700 major tribal groups in India (MOTA,2023) with 75 Primitive Tribal Groups, each one associated with a specific geographic area, some more dispersed than others. Most have their own language, which is generally different from the 'mainstream' language of the state in which they live. There is a total of 270 such tribal languages. Tribal people tend to live in two main types of situations: (a) in 'mixed' (tribal and nontribal) rural communities, within reach of educational and other opportunities and resources, and (b) in habitations that are small in size and located in relatively inaccessible hilly or forested areas of the country. About 22 per cent of tribal habitations have a population of less than 100 people, a further 40 per cent have 100-300 people, and the rest around 300-500 people (GoI, 2011). The distribution of tribal people in these two types of settlements varies markedly by state, district and even block, calling for different strategies to be used in different areas to provide elementary education to tribal children as stated in the following paragraphs.

In various regions of India, tribal communities coexist harmoniously with non-tribal populations in mixed rural settings. For instance, Kerala's Wayanad district boasts a thriving community where indigenous Paniya and Kattunayakan tribes share resources like schools, hospitals, and markets alongside non-tribal residents, benefiting from targeted government initiatives for tribal development. Similarly, in Odisha's Koraput district, the Bonda tribe lives in villages alongside other communities, encountering challenges but experiencing improved access to education and healthcare due to enhanced government services and infrastructure. North Eastern states like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Nagaland witness diverse tribal communities, such as Apatani, Garo, and Naga,

sharing villages with non-tribal groups. Noteworthy efforts have been made in this region to establish schools, healthcare centers, and economic opportunities, facilitating a blended rural environment. Additionally, tribes like Gond, Santhal, Bhil, Oraon, Khasi, and Munda in states such as Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Odisha exemplify the coexistence of tribal and non-tribal communities, showcasing a multifaceted landscape of shared resources and opportunities.

India's rich cultural tapestry is intricately woven with diverse tribal communities, many of whom inhabit small-sized settlements nestled in the remote and challenging landscapes of hills and forests. Take, for example, the Great Andamanese, one of the oldest surviving tribal groups found in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Their small settlements are tucked away amidst dense rainforests, where they traditionally engaged in hunting, fishing, and gathering, although their numbers have sadly dwindled over the years, rendering them a highly vulnerable community. In Andhra Pradesh's Nallamala Hills, the Chenchus exemplify another such tribe deeply connected to the forest, living in small scattered settlements within the Nallamala forests, practicing shifting cultivation, and preserving valuable traditional knowledge of medicinal plants. The Gaddi Shepherds, primarily residing in the mountainous regions of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir, lead a nomadic lifestyle in temporary shelters known as 'koli,' moving with their herds through the challenging Himalayan terrain, contributing significantly to the region's pastoral economy. Meanwhile, the Apatani, dwelling in the Ziro Valley of Arunachal Pradesh, live in large, well-organized villages amidst terraced paddy fields, showcasing self-sufficiency and a rich cultural heritage. The Jarawa, another tribe from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, fiercely preserve their isolated way of life in small nomadic groups within dense rainforests, emphasizing minimal environmental impact and a strong sense of community. Similar patterns can be observed with tribes like the Sentinalese, Pukis, Korcu, Bonda, and Lepcha, collectively reflecting the unique ways in which these communities thrive in small-sized habitations amid the challenging and often inaccessible terrains of hilly or forested areas across the country.

The proportion of children out of school in remote tribal areas is usually higher than among tribal children living in non-tribal areas. The main reasons for this are the limited educational infrastructure available in tribal areas because of their remoteness; tribal hamlets being cut off from main villages or well-populated rural areas by geographic features; the difficulties faced by children living in smaller habitations in accessing existing formal schools; and so on. Other reasons for low school enrolment among Scheduled Tribe children include the reluctance of Scheduled Tribe families to educate their children — in addition to the high illiteracy among Scheduled Tribes the parents may not value the education available, particularly in relation to its opportunity costs. Children are crucial family workers in the tribal economy which includes agriculture as a main occupation, cattle grazing, labor on work sites, collecting firewood or other minor forest produce, stone quarrying, mining, and home-based work such as processing forest produce. Low levels of learning are found

among tribal children not only because of household factors and problems with the language of instruction where this is not their mother tongue, but to other school-related variables. There is a general feeling among the researchers is that the school culture where these children are enrolled never take into account the culture related factors of the tribal communities and there is a feeling of imposition of the mainstream culture over the tribal communities which is distancing them from attaining education in the schools.

The Tribal Policy - Focus on Formal Education

Realizing that Scheduled Tribes are one of the most deprived and marginalized groups with respect to education, a host of programmes and measures were initiated ever since the Independence. Elementary education has remained a priority area in all the Five-Year Plans and it received special attention from the Tribal sub-plans (TSP) from the 5th Five Year Plan as well. Education of Scheduled Tribe children is considered important, not only because of the Constitutional obligation but also as a crucial input for total development of tribal communities.

Formal education is the key to all-round human development. Despite several campaigns to promote formal education ever since Independence, the literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes has remained low and the female literacy rate still lower compared to the national female literacy rate. Alienation from the society, lack of adequate infrastructure like schools, hostels and teachers, abject poverty and apathy towards irrelevant curriculum have stood in the way of Scheduled Tribes getting formal education.

To achieve the objective of reaching the benefit of education to the Scheduled Tribes, the Policies for the Scheduled Tribes envisaged that:

- Scheduled Tribes are included in the national programme of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan run by the Ministry of Human Resource Development.
- Development of primers in the tribal dialects in some of the states.
- Ashram Schools and residential hostels are opened in areas where no such facilities exist.
- At least one model residential school is located in each tribal concentration area.
- Education is linked with provision of supplementary nutrition.
- Special incentives like financial assistance, pocket allowance, free distribution of textbooks and school uniforms are provided.
- Teaching is imparted in the mother tongue of Scheduled Tribes at least up to the primary level. Educated tribal youth are given employment as teachers, wherever possible. (This will obviate the need to employ teachers belonging to far-off places who find commuting is as difficult as staying in a village with no basic amenities.
- Pedagogy is made relevant so that the Scheduled Tribes do not find it as alien.
- Curriculum and co-curriculum include aspects of meta skill up gradation of tribal children.

- Curricula for meta skill up gradation are to include aspects of tribal games and sports, archery, identification of plants of medicinal value, crafts art and culture, folk dance and folk songs, folk paintings etc.

Not only the policies developed specially for the Scheduled Tribes had focused on education but also the National policies on Education 1964 and 1986 and its revised Programme of Action 1992 all have made special mention relating to education of the Scheduled Tribes. NPE, 1986 and Programme of Action (POA), 1992 recognized the heterogeneity and diversity of the tribal areas, besides underlining the importance of instruction through the mother tongue and the need for preparing teaching/learning material in the tribal languages.

Another important development in the policy towards education of Scheduled Tribes is the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986 which specified among other things the following:

- Priority will be accorded to opening primary schools in tribal areas.
- There is need to develop curricula and devise instructional material in tribal language at the initial stages with arrangements for switchover to regional languages.
- ST youths will be encouraged to take up teaching in tribal areas.
- Ashram schools/residential schools will be established on a large scale in tribal areas.
- Incentive schemes will be formulated for the STs, keeping in view their special needs and lifestyle.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges the existing educational gap in educational attainment between tribal and non-tribal communities. Thus, it promotes education in mother tongues or local languages in the early years to build a strong foundation and prevent disadvantage due to language barriers. NEP 2020 mentions about the flexibility in curriculum and pedagogy. The sensitivity needs to be maintained to encourage the inclusion of tribal knowledge, culture, and heritage in the curriculum to make it relevant and engaging for tribal students. Teacher training and support laid emphasis on the need for culturally competent teachers and teacher training programs that incorporate tribal contexts and languages.

In terms of residential schools, it needs to be revisited to improve the quality by ensuring proper infrastructure, qualified teachers, and cultural sensitivity. For ensuring complete participation special provisions are encouraged for remote areas by recognizing the challenges and proposes alternative learning methods like mobile schools, flexible timings, and technology-enabled learning. Scholarships and financial aid are mentioned to supports tribal students through scholarships, fellowships, and other financial assistance schemes to reduce economic barriers to education. The local communities may be empowered by involving tribal communities in decision-making processes related to education planning and implementation.

It may be noted that inspite of concerted efforts implementation of various programmes designed to address the issues of tribal children remains a challenge due to lack of coordination between the implementing authorities, funding, and community collaboration. The policy's broad

goals need to be translated into clear and actionable plans at the state and local levels. Addressing teacher shortages and ensuring culturally sensitive training is crucial for successful implementation. Balancing the preservation of tribal knowledge with exposure to broader educational opportunities requires careful consideration. To reach this level it is imperative to delve deeper into the context and assess the nuances for reaching the desired goals of the educational development. Following section attempts to address these with the details on understanding the concept and the issues that needs specific attention.

Understanding “Culture”

An attempt has been made in this paper to understand the definition of the very important word, i.e. “Culture”, as it has been defined by a number of anthropologists which in general covers the knowledge, belief, art, moral and rituals and social relations which bind the society, the definition of E. B. Tylor and other social scientists have been taken into consideration to understand the culture of a society as well as how important it is in maintaining and controlling the society.

“Culture” is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (Tylor, 1871/1924, p.1). Singleton (1974) defines culture in an educational angle as “The shared products of human learning”, Charles Valentine (1968) has suggested that the use of the culture concept in anthropology imply three major assumptions:

1. Culture is universal, all people have culture and therefore share a common humanity;
2. Culture is organized, there is a coherence and structure among the pattern of human behavior and meaning; and
3. Culture is the product of human creativity; it is the collective product of human experience and shared interpretations of that experience as communicated within specific groups.

Culture: The learned patterns of behavior and thought that help a group adapt to its surroundings.

Holistic: No dimension of culture can be understood in isolation, cultures are integrated wholes.

Cultural Diversity

Scheduled Tribes exclusion arises from distinct economic and cultural factors, rooted in their traditional habitation in remote, forested terrains. This isolation preserved cultural autonomy but invited modernization-driven displacement, poverty, and exploitation (Sedwal and Kamat, 2011). Scheduled Tribes, constitutionally recognized as historically marginalized, receive special provisions, yet their educational progress remains unsatisfactory (Govinda and Sedwal, 2017). Ethnic groups in India have their own cultural identity and differ from each other in their life styles, habits, religious activities and most importantly the occupations. The occupations of the Scheduled Tribes in India originate from the type of habitations they occupy and inhabit and this occupation has resulted in a particular kind of life style and food habits as well as the community behavior such as living and

moving together in bands for hunting and activities which require the support of more than two or more persons. Accordingly, the various institutions of religion, marriage, family, kinship and lineages are established within the community protecting the larger interest of the respective tribal communities.

Addressing Cultural Diversity in Schools ¹

Having highly diverse 700 Scheduled Tribes which are notified in India is a major task in terms of educating them/bringing them to the main stream education. The children are enrolled in the schools, the ordeal begins, at times it is confusion and at times it is struggle to adjust to a new environment. The learning process which has taken place in the home and the community becomes different and the life style practiced at home is not accepted in the schools and it is a big confusion for the child to understand what is right and what is wrong. The schools do not have the mechanism to bridge the gap between the two cultures which at times may lead to lack of interest in the schooling activities.

The ordeal starts from toilet training to sleeping, eating habits and adjusting to the peer groups. The food which was available at home is no more available, the style of eating food is different, the style of sleeping at home is different, the style of taking bath is different, and the freedom which is available at home no more exists in the school. The rigid norm of the school creates confusion rather than inquisitiveness and interest to learn something new to happen in the schools. A sense of insecurity prevails among the children in the schools, scared of learning something new and a person who is going to teach and control them for everything. In order to understand the culture of the community and how the formal school provides education to the tribal children, the table below compares various aspects of tribal culture with various aspects of formal school functioning.

The school provides a different pedagogy which is different from the pedagogy of the community, adjusting to the new or alien kind of schooling process and learning which takes place in the school in a monotonous format does not attract the tribal children who are attuned to the flexible process of learning which takes place in the community, this they learn according to their own pace and there is no compulsion to learn a particular trade or occupation but the children learn whatever they feel happy to learn. This new learning habit binds the children to the school with the norm of discipline. Most of the habitations wherein the tribal communities reside is very rich in flora and fauna and rivulets/streams etc and these do not find any place in the premise of school and its curriculum, on the other hand the rich art and culture, the rituals are never taken into consideration in the school activities, this creates a drift among the children from the school curriculum which, is different from what they learn from their community and habitations. The cultural content of the community and the tribal groups does not find any place in the school curriculum including the language they use. In every aspect of schooling, the culture of the community remains unexplored, making learning process more difficult among these tribal children.

Tribal - Home Culture vis-à-vis School Functioning

School	Home/Community
Socialization	
Peer group – children from different tribal groups Restricted interaction Learn from Books	Home, parents, sibling and relatives Free Interaction Learn from Environment – the flora and fauna
Schooling and Learning	
Learn different things which are mostly new	Practice whatever the elders do and teach, learn from the peer group
Struggle to identify a role model	Elders as role models
Learn different things – Pedagogy - Teachers teach -Limitations in learning	The community, the elders & parents provide learning opportunities
Concept of time Introducing to the concept of time	Everything is according to their own will and no clear-cut concept of time followed
Learning From prescribed Pedagogy	
Learning them with bookish knowledge	Practical learning from society
The bookish concepts are new and different from what they observe in their community - Confusion	The nature and environment is fully understood by the community and are taught to the children.
Language problem – communication Taught in the Language of the State	Learning in their own language at least up to primary level is required, as they have to switch over to a totally new language
Do not understand the process of assessment and evaluation	The elders and community evaluate the performance of the children.
Learning is imposed and they do not like to learn in the schools.	Freedom to learn according to own choice from the community, elders and peers.
No tribal art and culture are taught and are not encouraged	Full of art and culture in the community which they learn from generation to generation.
No history of the tribal groups and their culture is taken into consideration	Everything is passed from generation to generation through oral tradition.
Nothing from the habitation is taught in the schools like flora and fauna.	The community teaches the children the flora and fauna, whether and climate etc.

Games and sports are not according to their own interest and they are not regularly conducted, potential of the tribal children is not taken into consideration.	They learn and prefer the sports and games practiced in the community and learn and utilize them in the future occupations.
No proper medicines are available in the schools and the tribal communities do not have any faith in these medicines	They have a variety of local medicines and utilize them in their day-to-day life.
School Conditions	Home Conditions
Have to follow school discipline, hostel discipline	Freedom
Restrictions of time relating to schooling, studying, playing and sleeping.	Freedom of time and they can do anything at their will.
Have to learn and understand new etiquettes	Etiquettes approved by family are followed
Problem of adjustment	Easily adjusts to the cultural setting
Toilet training remains a major problem	Prefer toilet training practiced in the home and community
Trained to maintain personal hygiene – like taking bath, wash clothes regularly and maintain bodily hygiene.	They are free to do as per their convenience. Prefer rivers and rivulets and natural surroundings for having an enjoyable bath.
Food habits are different	Prefer food habits practiced at home
The food served in schools do not take into account cultural & traditional food habits	Food liked by the family are prepared and shared. They prefer their traditional food.
Dress pattern – school uniforms are provided which although they like initially but given freedom like to dress up their traditional costumes.	They are free to wear dresses which they like.
The tribal children are not happy with the functions and festivals organized in the schools, which are alien to them.	Enjoy a variety of festivals, rituals and take part in each and every aspect of the ritual which lasts for longer durations with full of fun and food.
The school festivals and holidays are prescribed as per the State norms which does not suit the festivals of Tribal children. absenteeism.	They have their own ditties and religious festivals and functions which are not taken account by the schools, leading to large amount of

The Influence of Culture on Education

Having discussed some of the cultural issues which do not figure in the school functioning, the reference of the term “Culture of the community” which has been taken into account and discussed at great length reflect the lack of such cultural components which are practiced by these ethnic groups in the schools. The child who has born and brought up by the tribal families learns and imbibes most of the customs, traditions, values, morals, arts and ethos at home. Whereas the schools and the teachers teach them the values and morals of the main stream society of the country which conflicts with their culture, for e.g., the mid-day meals prescribes kind of food to get protein, calories and vitamins as felt be the food experts, whereas they feel happy to have their own cultural food with rice in water with a pinch of salt and a green chili and enjoy simple food without spice etc., and the non-vegetarian food which they relish are not served instead they are told to shift from such an existing practice and follow the food which do not match their cultural food they feel upset, when the teacher asks them to use the small bathrooms with limited water provisions for bathing they feel like losing their freedom of enjoying their bath in the streams in the middle of the forest. When they are told to sleep in the decently organized cots arranged in tiers and rows, in the middle of the night the tribal children get down to the floor crawl and enjoy their sleep happily in the cool floor as the beds are very hot to sleep due to warm weather conditions. When the teacher asks them to play, they pick their own traditional games and enjoy. Looking at some of the few examples which have been quoted in this paper it looks as if we are thrusting something culturally different upon them for which they are not prepared and have reluctance to accept them. This reluctance perhaps could be minimized in the schools so that the tribal children can get the freedom to learn in the schools by taking some of the culturally related factors of their own community. The tribal child who has a care free life in the community struggles to readjusts to the school routine which are different from their home culture and which is embedded in their socialization process which they acquire from their community. Even the thinking process takes place among the children in their own language and they translate it to the language of state while conversing with the teachers. The tribal groups having different life styles and process of socialization – cultural transmission – The schooling and education becomes altogether a new format of their life styles practices creating – confusion.

The formal schools established during colonial times in India especially meant for the mainstream population do not take into account the cultural knowledge, information, skills, attitudes, conceptions, beliefs, values and other mental components of tribal cultures that people socially learn during acculturation. The text books which are developed by the education departments are transacted with the examples and illustrations which are from the mainstream Indian communities. The transaction of teaching- learning process is not substantiated with the culture of the community and local ecology and tribal arts culture are rarely covered in the school curriculum, as the teachers are in a hurry to complete the assigned syllabus in a particular assigned time by the education

department. Moreover, the school curriculum defines what is regarded as valid knowledge, pedagogy refers to the valid transmission of knowledge, ignoring and undermining the local indigenous knowledge; although it has been proved by many researches that the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters (Au & Kawakami 1994; Foster, 1995; Gay, 2000; Hollins, 1996; Kleinfield, 1975; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). In general, the formal schools have teachers who are inadequately prepared to teach ethnically diverse tribal children in the schools. There is no pedagogy of the tribal community covering cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns. What is it different that the schools are doing for these ethnic groups, the educationists need to introspect, because these ethnic groups have something different from the non-ethnic groups, then if you consider them different, and providing reservations and extending a large variety of schemes for their welfare and development, needs to be carried out differently? This difference is a big challenge and doing differently becomes more cumbersome and time consuming but this will yield results. Halfhearted programmes without any purpose may not yield any results and the ethnic groups will remain where they are and all the efforts will be futile without any results.

Therefore, if one looks at the issues identified in the table given above, the differences arising in organizing the schools particularly for the tribal children has to be made more context specific – in the sense that the cultural aspects practiced among the community needs to be taken into account by the teachers and the school administrators should provide such skills through training and posting suitable teachers in the tribal schools in order to make the schools more culturally sensitive, so that the children can enjoy in learning in the schools and thereby can adapt to the teaching learning processes of the schools effectively. The feeling of cultural relevance is required to be incorporated holistically in the schooling process.

Notes:

¹ *This section is based on the field experiences of Author 2 in various states in India like Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh etc. to mention a few over his three decades of research work.*

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