

Empowering Tribal Youth for Nation Building: A Critical Review of National Initiatives and Challenges

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Abstract- This paper critically reviews the landscape of tribal youth empowerment in India, interrogating the effectiveness of government and non-governmental initiatives in addressing systemic barriers faced by tribal communities. Despite demographic strength and policy attention, tribal youth remain marginalized in education, employment, and skill development sectors. National programs such as Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), Skill India Mission, Van Dhan Yojana, and tribal scholarship schemes have demonstrated progress in expanding access and promoting employability. However, the persistence of cultural alienation, infrastructural gaps, and policy implementation bottlenecks raises questions about their transformative potential. Drawing on government reports, field studies, and NGO interventions, the paper explores sector-wise impacts, education, vocational training, agripreneurship, and psychosocial development while highlighting challenges related to socio-economic deprivation, identity crises, and digital exclusion. The study advocates for culturally responsive, community-led, and technology-enabled approaches that center tribal agency and identity. It calls for systemic reforms in monitoring and representation to reimagine tribal youth not as passive recipients of welfare but as active contributors to inclusive nation-building.

Keywords: Rural Development, Youth and Skill Development, Tribal Development

I. INTRODUCTION

Despite decades of targeted development planning, a critical question persists: Why do tribal youth in India continue to remain at the margins of the nation's growth narrative? How effective are the government's interventions in addressing the lived realities, aspirations, and systemic exclusions experienced by tribal communities?

And more importantly, are these initiatives culturally rooted, or do they attempt to assimilate tribal youth into a mainstream model of development that often overlooks indigenous identity? India's tribal population, which constitutes 8.6% of the total population (Ministry of Tribal Affairs [MoTA],

2023), represents not only cultural diversity but also a demographic dividend. Yet, tribal youth face entrenched challenges in education, employment, and access to services, compounded by socio-economic vulnerabilities and cultural marginalization (Minz, 2020). Traditional sources of livelihood are rapidly eroding due to deforestation, displacement, and industrialization, leaving tribal youth to navigate modernity with inadequate institutional support (Sheikh, 2025).

National programs such as the Skill India Mission (MSDE, 2022), Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) (MoTA, 2022), Van Dhan Yojana (TRIFED, 2020), and ST scholarship schemes (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2022) aim to empower tribal youth through education, skill development, and entrepreneurship. However, one must ask: Are these initiatives truly transformative, or do they merely scratch the surface of deeper structural inequalities? Have these schemes succeeded in integrating tribal youth as empowered contributors to nation-building, or do they continue to reflect a top-down, welfare-centric development approach? This paper critically reviews the scope and limitations of these national efforts, interrogating whether they address the cultural, psychosocial, and economic dimensions of tribal youth development. It advocates for a reimagining of empowerment frameworks—ones that are culturally responsive, community-led, and rooted in tribal realities, allowing youth to become agents of inclusive and sustainable nation-building.

Demographic and Socio-Cultural Context of Tribal Youth in India

India is home to over 104 million Scheduled Tribe (ST) individuals, constituting 8.6% of the total population, according to Census 2011 data (Ministry of Tribal Affairs [MoTA], 2023). These communities are spread across forested, hilly, and remote areas, with the highest concentrations in states such as

Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and the North-Eastern region. A significant proportion of the tribal population, more than half is under the age of 25, placing tribal youth at the heart of India's demographic dividend (MoTA, 2023).

Despite their demographic strength, tribal youth continue to face stark socio-economic disadvantages. Poverty, underdevelopment, and historical marginalization have left tribal regions lagging in almost all human development indicators. Over 40% of ST households live below the poverty line, and the literacy rate among tribal youth remains significantly lower than the national average (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2020). Access to basic services, such as electricity, safe drinking water, internet connectivity, and quality education is often irregular and inadequate in tribal areas (Kumar, 2023).

Culturally, tribal communities are marked by rich indigenous knowledge systems, strong ties to nature, and distinct socio-linguistic identities. However, mainstream development policies have often ignored these cultural realities, resulting in alienation and identity conflicts among tribal youth (Minz, 2020). The erosion of traditional livelihoods, pressures of land acquisition, and displacement due to industrial projects have not only deepened economic vulnerabilities but also dislocated tribal youth from their cultural roots. As Sheikh (2025) notes, tribal youth are increasingly caught between traditional worldviews and modern aspirations, often navigating dual identities with limited support systems. While exposure to digital media and urban lifestyles has expanded their aspirations, many feel constrained by local infrastructure gaps, social stigma, and limited mobility. This duality between rootedness in community and aspiration for mobility defines the socio-cultural struggle of tribal youth today. Understanding this demographic and cultural context is essential for designing empowerment programs that are inclusive, respectful of tribal heritage, and responsive to the lived realities of youth who exist at the margins of both geography and policy.

National Initiatives for Tribal Youth Empowerment
The empowerment of tribal youth in India has become a key focus for both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), aimed at enhancing their socio-economic status and promoting inclusive national development. These programs

address the numerous challenges faced by tribal youth, including limited access to quality education, skill development, and entrepreneurship opportunities.

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) has launched various initiatives aimed at tribal development, such as the Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana (VKY). This program emphasizes holistic development through education, livelihood generation, and skill-building. Its goal is to bridge the development gap between tribal and non-tribal populations by providing targeted support for infrastructure, health, and human resource development.

One of MoTA's flagship programs is the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana (PMVDY), which promotes tribal entrepreneurship by establishing Van Dhan Vikas Kendras. These centers are designed to equip tribal youth and communities with training in value addition, processing, and marketing of forest products, thereby enabling sustainable livelihoods and enterprise development. In addition to government initiatives, NGOs such as Pradan, the Bharatiya Tribal Party, and the Foundation for Ecological Security have played a significant role in empowering tribal youth. They implement community-based programs that focus on leadership development, self-employment, and life skills. For example, PRADAN works with tribal youth to enhance their capacities in agriculture-based livelihoods and facilitates the formation of self-help groups to promote financial independence. Collectively, these programs aim to empower tribal youth by improving access to education, promoting entrepreneurship, and enhancing employability through skill development. Ultimately, this contributes to their socio-economic upliftment and integration into the mainstream economy.

Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)

The Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) were launched in 1997-98 by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) with the primary objective of providing quality education to Scheduled Tribe (ST) children in remote areas, matching the standards of the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (MoTA, 2022). These fully residential schools aim to promote academic excellence among tribal students from Class VI to XII by offering a comprehensive curriculum that includes academics, co-curricular activities, and life skills training. The core design of

EMRS includes residential schooling, modern infrastructure, trained faculty, and a focus on holistic development. A significant feature of these schools is their integration of technology-enabled classrooms and a curriculum that prepares students for competitive examinations such as NEET, JEE, and civil services (NITI Aayog, 2021). The government aims to establish at least one EMRS in each block with a significant tribal population (defined as 50% or more ST population and at least 20,000 tribal people), with the goal of operationalizing 740 EMRSs across the country by 2025 (MoTA, 2022).

Studies and reports indicate that EMRSs have significantly improved tribal students' access to quality education. According to the NITI Aayog Annual Report (2021), EMRS students have demonstrated improved academic performance and increased participation in national-level exams. The structured residential environment not only helps reduce dropout rates but also fosters a conducive atmosphere for tribal youth to aspire beyond traditional barriers and engage in nation-building through education and professional success (Rani & Shekhar, 2021). Despite infrastructural and staffing challenges in some states, the EMRS model is increasingly viewed as a transformative initiative that can bridge the education gap between tribal and non-tribal youth in India.

National Scholarship Schemes

To promote educational equity and facilitate access to higher education for Scheduled Tribe (ST) students, the Government of India has introduced several national-level scholarship schemes aimed at reducing financial barriers, encouraging academic persistence, and improving representation of tribal youth in tertiary education institutions.

The three major scholarships available to ST students include:

1. **Post Matric Scholarship (PMS) for ST Students:** This centrally sponsored scheme provides financial assistance for ST students pursuing studies from Class XI to post-graduation. The scholarship covers tuition fees, maintenance allowances, book grants, and other academic expenses (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023).

2. **National Fellowship and Scholarship for Higher Education of ST Students (NFST):** The NFST comprises two components: fellowships for M.Phil.

and Ph.D. students, and scholarships for ST students pursuing professional courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The goal is to encourage advanced academic pursuits and research among tribal students (University Grants Commission [UGC], 2022).

3. **Pre-Matric Scholarship for ST Students:** Although primarily aimed at school-level students (Classes IX and X), this scheme plays a crucial role in preparing students for higher education by reducing dropout rates at the secondary level (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023).

Outcomes and Impact on Higher Education Participation

These scholarship schemes have contributed to an increase in both enrollment and retention of tribal students in higher education. The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) for 2021–22 reported a steady rise in the gross enrollment ratio (GER) of ST students, which reached 19.1% in 2021, up from 17.2% in 2018, largely due to financial support schemes (Ministry of Education, 2022). Furthermore, the NFST has enabled a significant number of ST scholars to enter research and professional fields traditionally underrepresented by tribal communities.

Research indicates that scholarships improve academic motivation, reduce economic dependency, and empower ST students to pursue degrees in engineering, medicine, law, and social sciences (Ravichandran & Pillai, 2021). However, scholars note that challenges regarding timely disbursement, digital access for applications, and awareness at the grassroots level require further attention to maximize the impact of these initiatives.

Skill Development Initiatives

Skill development is recognized as a crucial factor in empowering tribal youth and integrating them into the mainstream economy. With a large portion of India's tribal population residing in rural and remote areas, equipping them with employable skills is essential for sustainable development and poverty alleviation.

Skill India Mission and Tribal Youth

Launched in 2015, the Skill India Mission aims to train over 400 million Indians in market-relevant skills by 2022. Through its flagship program, the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY),

tribal youth receive free short-term training in various trades, including construction, information technology, healthcare, and retail, along with certification and job placement assistance. The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), in collaboration with the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), has established skill training centers in tribal regions to ensure inclusivity (MSDE, 2021).

Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY)

The DDU-GKY program, implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development, focuses on skilling rural youth aged 15–35 from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including tribal youth. The program emphasizes wage employment and partnerships with industry. According to the DDU-GKY Annual Report (2022), a significant percentage of beneficiaries belong to Scheduled Tribes, with over 50,000 tribal youth trained since the program's inception (MoRD, 2022). The scheme also includes provisions for residential training, post-placement support, and the development of soft skills to bridge the rural-urban skill divide.

Other Targeted Initiatives

Programs like the Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS) and TRIFED's Van Dhan Vikas Kendras have further expanded the skill development landscape. The JSS scheme offers vocational training for non-literate individuals and school dropouts in tribal areas, while the Van Dhan Kendras focus on training tribal youth and women in adding value to forest produce and managing entrepreneurial activities (TRIFED, 2020).

Community Outreach and Inclusion

To ensure the participation of tribal youth, culturally sensitive outreach strategies are required. Training modules in local languages, collaboration with tribal leaders, and mobile training units are increasingly being utilized. Community-based mobilization has proven effective in raising awareness among tribal youth about available skill training opportunities (Bordoloi & Das, 2021). Additionally, many NGOs working in tribal regions partner with government schemes to enhance participation through trust-building and localized interventions.

Despite progress, challenges such as lack of digital access, low awareness, and socio-cultural barriers continue to hinder full participation. Strengthening community engagement, increasing the number of

local trainers, and aligning courses with regional employment trends can further improve outcomes.

Sector-Wise Developmental Focus Areas

Vocational Training and Skill Development

Vocational training plays a crucial role in improving the employability and socio-economic mobility of tribal youth. Despite the Government of India's significant focus on skill development through national initiatives such as the Skill India Mission, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), and Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS), participation among tribal youth remains low due to a combination of structural and cultural barriers.

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) report from the NSS 75th round reveals that only 2.5% of rural Scheduled Tribe (ST) youth aged 15–29 have received formal vocational training, compared to 6.4% in the general population. Kumar (2023) notes that while the Skill India Mission has increased reach in the North-Eastern region, many tribal youth cannot access its benefits due to poor awareness, a lack of rural training centers, and transportation challenges. Additionally, dropout rates are high due to a disconnect between training modules and tribal livelihood realities.

Furthermore, the Sahu and Trivedi (2019) identifies digital illiteracy, lack of soft skills, and language barriers as key reasons for low participation among tribal youth. Many training programs are standardized and urban-centric, overlooking the unique economic and environmental contexts of tribal regions.

Social Stigma and Cultural Relevance

Social perceptions surrounding vocational education, particularly among tribal communities, further complicate participation. Minz (2020) reports that vocational programs are often viewed as inferior to formal academic streams, leading tribal youth to hesitate in enrolling in programs that seem disconnected from their traditional identities and values. Additionally, many tribal youth are pressured into early labor, leaving little room for long-term training opportunities.

The (Sheikh, 2025) paper emphasizes that vocational initiatives often overlook culturally relevant skills such as bamboo craft, organic farming, forest product

processing, and herbal medicine, which are vital to tribal economies. This lack of cultural alignment results in disinterest, high dropout rates, and a loss of indigenous knowledge.

Effectiveness of Vocational Training Interventions
Models that align vocational skills with tribal traditions and local economies have shown higher success rates. The Van Dhan Yojana, initiated by TRIFED (2020), is one example that trains tribal youth and women in the value addition of Minor Forest Produce (MFP), including packaging and marketing, which promotes sustainable livelihoods and small-scale entrepreneurship.

Similarly, the Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS) scheme, as reported by the Ministry of Education (2022), provides vocational training to non-literate and school-dropout tribal youth through localized, need-based, and community-sensitive programs. JSS initiatives have improved participation when implemented in tribal languages and facilitated by local trainers.

The NGO PRADAN (2021) has effectively engaged tribal youth in Jharkhand and Odisha by offering agro-based skill training and rural entrepreneurship support. Their programs integrate tribal worldviews with practical business models, resulting in better retention and livelihood generation after training. The Sahu and Trivedi (2019) initiative has also reported success through flexible, modular programs in eco-tourism, organic cultivation, and traditional art forms, implemented in consultation with tribal community leaders to enhance trust and relevance.

Agricultural Livelihood and Agripreneurship
Agriculture remains the primary livelihood for most tribal communities in India. However, tribal youth are increasingly disinterested in traditional agricultural practices due to declining profitability, a lack of modern knowledge, land degradation, and the allure of urban employment. To retain youth in agriculture and harness their potential, integrating agripreneurship has emerged as a transformative approach.

Factors Influencing Youth Engagement in Agriculture
Several socio-economic and psychological factors shape the engagement of tribal youth in agricultural livelihoods. According to Sahu and Trivedi (2019),

key determinants include landholding size, household income, social participation, exposure to media, education level, and rural-urban contact. Youth from families with larger landholdings and agricultural knowledge are more likely to pursue farming, especially when provided with technical and financial support.

Minz (2020) highlights that many tribal youth face an identity crisis, struggling to balance their traditional agricultural heritage with aspirations for modern careers. Additionally, irregular rainfall, lack of irrigation facilities, limited access to markets, and inadequate extension services have led to agricultural distress, pushing youth toward migration and wage labor.

Kumar (2023) notes that although Skill India programs have introduced agri-based training, these initiatives often do not align with the ecological and cultural realities of tribal regions, making the transition from subsistence to commercial farming challenging.

Agripreneurship the application of entrepreneurial skills to agricultural ventures—offers a promising model for tribal youth. It encourages innovation, risk-taking, value addition, and market engagement in agriculture. The PRADAN (2021) initiative in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh is a successful example of this approach. It has helped tribal youth form Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) and cooperatives focused on organic cultivation, seed production, poultry, and watershed-based farming systems. These youth-led enterprises have enhanced income and social mobility while preserving indigenous practices.

Similarly, the TRIFED (2020) Van Dhan Yojana has supported tribal youth in combining non-timber forest produce (NTFP) collection with agripreneurship models, such as processing mahua, tamarind, and lac into market-ready products. This integration of forest-based livelihoods with entrepreneurial frameworks has increased household incomes and reduced dependency on exploitative traders.

The paper by Sheikh (2025) further emphasizes the importance of blending modern agricultural knowledge with traditional wisdom. Interventions that offer financial literacy, mobile-based market

access, soil health training, and farm mechanization tailored to tribal terrains have a higher success rate. In regions like Odisha, community-based agripreneurship hubs run by tribal youth have not only improved local food security but also reduced migration.

Education and Psychosocial Development

Education is a crucial driver of empowerment for tribal youth; however, access, retention, and academic progression remain significant challenges for Tribal communities. Tribal youth often find themselves caught between systemic inequalities and cultural dislocation, leading to limited participation in education. Psychosocial factors—such as self-efficacy, aspirations, perceived barriers, and social support—play a vital role in influencing educational outcomes among Tribal youth.

Factors Affecting Education Pursuit among Tribal Youth

Multiple structural and socio-cultural challenges hinder the educational advancement of tribal youth. According to Minz (2020), the geographical isolation of many tribal communities' results in inadequate school infrastructure and a shortage of teachers, contributing to higher dropout rates. Economic hardships, early marriage, seasonal migration, and familial responsibilities often force many students to abandon formal education prematurely.

The study by Sheikh (2025) notes that tribal youth frequently lack academic role models and are confronted with low educational expectations from their families and communities. In certain regions, a disconnect between the school curriculum and indigenous knowledge systems makes education feel irrelevant or alienating. Furthermore, Kumar (2023) emphasizes that language barriers, discriminatory attitudes from teachers, and poor representation of tribal cultures in textbooks contribute to educational disengagement. This situation can lead to low confidence levels, self-doubt, and limited aspirations among tribal learners.

Role of Self-Efficacy, Aspirations, and Social Support

Psychosocial variables, such as self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to succeed—significantly impact the educational journey of Tribal youth. Students with higher self-efficacy are more likely to

remain motivated, overcome academic obstacles, and aspire to higher education, despite external challenges. PRADAN (2021) has implemented interventions aimed at enhancing self-belief and leadership among tribal adolescents, resulting in improved school attendance and goal-setting behaviors.

The work of Sahu and Trivedi (2019) highlights the importance of nurturing future-oriented aspirations through community mentorship, exposure visits, and storytelling by successful tribal professionals. When youth can envision meaningful career paths, they are more inclined to stay in school and invest in their education. Social support—from parents, teachers, peers, and community leaders—is equally critical. According to Minz (2020), tribal youth with strong familial and institutional backing are more resilient in navigating the challenges of higher education. Initiatives such as residential schooling (e.g., EMRS), bridge courses, and gender-sensitive counseling have also proven effective in increasing confidence and reducing dropout rates. Ultimately, educational programs that integrate emotional, cultural, and academic support are more likely to create lasting impacts. A culturally responsive pedagogy, combined with psychosocial mentoring and peer support groups, can significantly improve educational retention and academic success among tribal youth.

Impact and Outcomes of National Initiatives

National initiatives aimed at empowering tribal youth through education, skill development, and livelihood promotion have produced significant results. Several government schemes—such as the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Van Dhan Yojana, and various tribal scholarships—have enhanced educational access, economic participation, and social integration for tribal communities.

Increased Access to Quality Education

Programs like the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) have expanded access to quality education for tribal students across India. As of 2023, over 401 EMRS schools have been established, enrolling more than 113,000 tribal students (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023). These schools provide free education, residential facilities, and coaching for competitive exams, helping to bridge the educational divide between tribal and non-tribal populations.

“The objective is to ensure that tribal students gain access to quality education in remote areas, enabling them to compete in all walks of life” (MoTA, 2023).

Enhanced Employability and Economic Integration

Under the Skill India Mission and its flagship program, PMKVY, more than 1.5 million tribal youth have received skill training in various sectors, including retail, construction, healthcare, and IT (MSDE, 2022). These efforts have increased their employability, with many finding jobs in organized sectors or starting their own micro-enterprises. Additionally, the Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) under TRIFED have trained over 360,000 tribal gatherers in the value addition and processing of forest produce, significantly contributing to income generation and entrepreneurship within tribal communities (TRIFED, 2022).

“The Van Dhan Yojana has integrated tribal forest gatherers into entrepreneurial activities, creating sustainable income through value addition” (TRIFED, 2022).

Improved Self-Reliance and Community Leadership

Skill development programs and educational support have fostered self-reliance and leadership among tribal youth, particularly in regions where community-based organizations and self-help groups are active. The Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS) scheme has allowed many school-dropout tribal youth to acquire life skills and start community enterprises, especially in states like Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Jharkhand (Ministry of Education, 2022).

“JSS centers act as catalysts in transforming the lives of youth in backward and tribal districts” (MoE, 2022).

Greater Inclusion in Mainstream Development Narratives

The integration of schemes focused on education, skill development, entrepreneurship, and financial inclusion has led to greater representation of tribal youth within mainstream economic and social development frameworks. Initiatives like Digital India, Startup India, and the Post Matric Scholarship for Scheduled Tribe (ST) students have enabled tribal youth to access higher education, online

opportunities, and funding mechanisms. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs and NITI Aayog have also been working to incorporate tribal youth perspectives in national-level planning through programs like Aspirational Districts and the Pradhan Mantri Janjatiya Vikas Mission (PMJVM), fostering participatory development (MoTA, 2023).

Challenges in Tribal Youth Development

Despite several government initiatives aimed at empowering tribal youth, a multitude of structural, socio-cultural, and institutional challenges continue to impede their full development. To tackle these challenges effectively, we need a thorough and context-aware approach.

Socio-Economic Challenges

Tribal youth often grow up in economically marginalized regions marked by poverty, limited access to quality education and healthcare, and high rates of underemployment. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI, 2020), over 40% of Scheduled Tribe (ST) households fall below the poverty line, with tribal youth disproportionately affected by the lack of livelihood opportunities.

The paper by Sheikh (2025) notes that rural and forest-based tribal areas suffer from severe infrastructure deficits—schools without teachers, health centers lacking doctors, and insufficient transportation options—creating barriers to upward mobility. Furthermore, unemployment and underemployment among educated tribal youth are increasing due to a mismatch between the skills taught and market demand.

As Kumar (2023) highlights in the context of Northeast India, the economic fragility of tribal families often forces youth to drop out of school early, engage in low-wage labor, or migrate to cities in search of insecure and exploitative jobs.

Cultural and Identity-Related Challenges

While modernization and external interventions aim to integrate tribal youth into the mainstream, they often result in cultural erosion and an identity crisis. Traditional occupations and indigenous knowledge systems are frequently devalued or excluded from formal education and skill development programs. As noted by Minz (2020), many tribal youth experience

cultural dislocation, struggling to navigate between the values of their communities and the expectations of the dominant society. The lack of culturally responsive curricula, particularly in early education, alienates youth and weakens their connection to their heritage.

Additionally, Sahu and Trivedi (2019) document that community elders often view modern education with suspicion, fearing the loss of values and traditions, which can further reduce youth participation in national schemes.

Institutional and Policy Challenges

Although there is a wide array of tribal welfare schemes in India, many suffer from inefficient implementation, lack of coordination, and inadequate funding. Minz (2020) emphasizes that tribal development policies are often top-down, rarely incorporating grassroots feedback and failing to adapt to the diverse realities of tribal communities across different regions.

Moreover, bureaucratic hurdles and political underrepresentation remain significant concerns. Tribal youth have limited access to decision-making platforms at local, state, and national levels, which reduces the visibility of their needs within governance structures. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2023), delays in scholarship disbursements, underutilization of Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), and a lack of trained staff in tribal-specific institutions continue to hinder positive outcomes.

Other Systemic Challenges

Tribal youth also face health and nutrition insecurity, which adversely impacts their educational and economic outcomes. According to MoSPI (2020) and the Ministry of Health, tribal communities exhibit higher rates of malnutrition, anaemia, and limited access to health infrastructure, particularly in hilly and forested regions. The digital divide is another growing barrier. With the increasing digitization of education and employment services, tribal youth lacking internet access, digital devices, and information and communication technology (ICT) skills find themselves further marginalized. Reports by the Ministry of Education (2022) and TRIFED (2020) suggest that digital literacy initiatives are

often urban-centric, leaving tribal communities behind.

Social stigma and discrimination, both within and outside their communities, also limit tribal youth's confidence and access to opportunities. Sheikh (2025) and PRADAN (2021) highlight that stereotypes and exclusionary practices in educational institutions and workplaces often isolate tribal youth and hinder their potential.

Opportunities and Future Directions

While tribal youth face a complex array of socio-cultural and institutional challenges, the groundwork laid by national initiatives presents significant opportunities to advance their development in inclusive, sustainable, and culturally relevant ways. A forward-looking strategy should prioritize systemic transformation while centering on the cultural identity, aspirations, and leadership potential of tribal youth.

Strategies for Culturally Responsive Interventions

Mainstream policies and programs must move beyond homogenized approaches and be deeply rooted in the cultural realities of tribal communities. Interventions should recognize traditional knowledge systems, indigenous skills, and local socio-ecological contexts as valuable assets, rather than viewing them as deficiencies. Culturally responsive curricula that incorporate tribal languages, history, crafts, and ecological wisdom can promote relevance and pride in education. Agripreneurship models, such as those supported by TRIFED and PRADAN, demonstrate how livelihood initiatives can align with cultural practices to ensure better adoption and sustainability.

Furthermore, vocational training programs need to be tailored to local contexts and developed in consultation with tribal youth and elders to address the disconnect often felt between formal training and lived experiences. This approach ensures ownership, continuity, and effectiveness of government schemes.

Community Participation and Youth Leadership

Empowerment should be regarded as both an individual and collective process. Strengthening community-based institutions, such as youth collectives, cooperatives, and local governance bodies, can provide powerful platforms for tribal

youth to express themselves, organize, and lead. Programs that include mentorship from local leaders and successful alumni in education, entrepreneurship, or public service can help cultivate aspiration, self-efficacy, and civic engagement among younger generations. Moreover, integrating youth into decision-making processes from school management committees to local development planning can enhance accountability and inclusion, making policy delivery more responsive.

Technology-Enabled Solutions for Education and Employment

While the digital divide is a critical concern, it also represents an untapped opportunity. When made accessible and relevant, technology can bridge gaps in education, skill training, and market access. Expanding community-based digital resource centers with localized content and support for tribal languages can facilitate greater participation in e-learning and vocational platforms. Mobile-based agronomic advisories, e-market platforms for forest products, and tele-health services can empower tribal youth in remote areas. Crucially, digital literacy must be regarded as a foundational skill introduced early and taught in inclusive formats. Initiatives like Digital India and Start-up India should have tribal-specific components to support entrepreneurship and innovation.

Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation Frameworks

To ensure that initiatives focused on tribal youth are impactful, it is crucial to strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms. Many schemes suffer from inadequate real-time data, limited beneficiary feedback, and poor outcome tracking. Implementing community-led monitoring tools, digital dashboards, and third-party evaluations can enhance transparency and facilitate adjustments in program design.

Additionally, building the capacities of local administrators, teachers, and facilitators in inclusive data practices and participatory assessments can ensure that policies remain dynamic and context-aware. Policies should aim to close not only the development gaps but also the perception and representation gaps, ensuring that tribal youth are not passive recipients but active agents in their own growth journey. This forward-looking approach

combining cultural respect, community leadership, digital inclusion, and systemic accountability can make tribal youth development truly transformative and central to India's inclusive nation-building agenda.

CONCLUSION

Empowering tribal youth is not merely a developmental necessity but a foundational step toward inclusive and sustainable nation-building. The review reveals that while numerous national initiatives such as EMRS, Skill India, Van Dhan Yojana, and scholarship schemes have made notable strides in improving educational access, skill acquisition, and economic participation, they often fall short of addressing the deeper, structural barriers embedded in tribal realities. Socio-economic vulnerabilities, cultural dislocation, implementation gaps, and limited representation continue to constrain the transformative potential of these programs.

The findings underline the urgency of reimagining tribal youth development beyond the framework of welfare delivery. A more effective approach must be grounded in cultural sensitivity, community participation, and policy responsiveness. Tribal youth should not be viewed as passive beneficiaries, but as capable agents whose knowledge systems, aspirations, and leadership are integral to India's growth trajectory. This requires not only policy innovation but also a shift in institutional mind-set from integration to inclusion, from uniformity to contextual adaptation. For India to truly harness its demographic dividend, tribal youth must be placed at the center of policy discourse with the tools, voice, and space to shape their own futures. Only then can empowerment move from rhetoric to reality, and tribal youth from margins to mainstream.

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