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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### REFLECTION ON KEY ELEMENTS AND CHALLENGES OF TRIBES OF KERALA IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ROLE OF POLITICS AND ECONOMY

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#### Abstract

“One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world.” “Education is education. We should learn everything and then choose which path to follow. Education is neither Eastern nor Western, it is human.” Malala Yousafza (2014). Education is the root of development and is the must tool to ensure equality of opportunity; following this philosophy, the central and state governments have been making various efforts to educate the masses. Even after intensive programmes and policies offered by the central and state government, the development hasn't reached the education sector among the tribal community. According to Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) 2016-17 about 19.6% of students belong to Scheduled Castes at the primary level, but this fraction falls to 17.3% at the higher secondary level. These enrolment drop-offs are more severe for Scheduled Tribes students (10.6% to 6.8%), and differently-abled children (1.1% to 0.25%), with even greater declines for female students within each of these categories. The decline in enrolment in higher education is even steeper. (National Education Policy, NEP,2020). Weak academic performance and the increasing dropout rate are even today common among Scheduled Tribe communities. Politics, economy, community, and gender are correlated with one's life aspirations, overall learning skills, and adjustment to the educational institution.

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#### Introduction:-

Education is one of the primary agents of transformation towards progress. It is an activity, or a series of activities, or a process that either improves the immediate living conditions, social, economic, political, human, cultural, environmental or increases the potential for future living. At the same time economy, politics, culture, and gender play an important role in bringing tangible benefits by developing Tribes. It expands livelihood opportunities and increases earning potential and thus helps in tackling the problem of poverty at large. The major role that education has been able to play is with regard to skill inculcation and skill improvement of the persons.

There are thirty-five different tribal communities residing in the Kerala state and they constitute 26.3 percent (6.6 million5) of the total population of the State. More than sixty percent of these Tribes are living below the poverty line. Some of the obstacles in higher education in tribal areas are lack of infrastructure, functional deficiency,

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ignorance, poor socio-economic conditions, and gender discrimination. Inadequate educational infrastructure and services, lack of resources - in terms of material and manpower, shortage of teachers and schools makes things even worse in tribal and forest areas. Personal accounts of various tribal authors have exposed how difficult it is for a tribal person to cope with the outside world especially in the settings of an educational institution. One of the incidents from the childhood days of an eminent economist and academician Prof. (Dr.) Kunhaman. Dr. Kunhaman recollected and mentioned this burning incident in an autobiographical work called *Ethiru*, 2020. "Sir, don't call me by caste, call me Kunhaman. "What is wrong in me calling by your caste name?" He asked, slapping my cheek. He was a powerful landlord in our locality. He asked where my book was. When I said I had no book, he joked that I came to drink porridge (mid-day meal) and not to study." (Ethiru, 2020). Tribal communities and children from Scheduled Tribes also face disadvantages at multiple levels due to various historical and geographical factors. Children from tribal communities often find their school education irrelevant and foreign to their lives, both culturally and academically. While several programmatic interventions to uplift children from tribal communities are currently in place and will continue to be pursued, special mechanisms need to be made to ensure that children belonging to tribal communities receive the benefits of these interventions.

### **Need and significance of the study**

Reflections about higher education among the Tribes of Kerala are of importance and significance to study when Kerala is aiming for a digital and innovation-based economy to identify and stop the increasing inequality and inaccessibility in educational opportunity. The hierarchy among tribal groups affecting the higher education goals and ambitions of students of Tribes of Kerala also needs attention. The Tribal politics or political ideologies of the Tribes need to be understood in a greater depth. There is a diversity in the political behaviour of different Tribal groups across the state of Kerala. Marxian, socialist, democratic, and capitalistic characteristics are exhibited by different tribal communities in various parts. The geographical location also plays a part in the political identity of various Tribes. The family economy and financial status along with the effectiveness of tribal welfare packages and their timely delivery play a crucial role in determining the education standards and achievements among Tribes. Improved the economic status of the family will positively contribute to the educational level of any student as they have better access to study materials including test books and online platforms and accommodation facilities and travel arrangements could be afforded. The findings of the study will give a real picture of the gap prevailing in the existing system of education in tribal background.

### **Definition of the Key Terms**

#### **Reflection:**

In the present study reflection means evaluating the status of enrolment of Tribes in higher education by carefully analysing the parameters.

#### **Key elements:**

In the present study key elements are programmes and policies by the Central and State governments for increasing the enrolment of Tribes in higher education.

#### **Politics:**

Politics refers to the political awareness of the participant as a citizen of India including the level of knowledge about the rights and responsibilities. Politics here does not refer to the membership of participants in various political parties.

#### **Economy:**

Refers to the household economy of each participant which includes the occupation of parents, area of land possession, area of ownership and other financial investment, and availability of fellowships and scholarship.

### **Objectives:-**

1. To study the complex variables responsible for the low enrolment rate of Tribes in higher education
2. Find out the challenges faced by the Tribes of Kerala for higher education.
3. Find out the role of the economy and politics for improving tribal enrolment in Higher Education

### Review of Related Study:-

Review of related literature underlines that despite constitutional guarantees and persistent efforts, Tribal communities continue to lag behind the general population in education. The reasons for backwardness can be categorized as external, internal, and socio-economic, and psychological. The external constraints are related to problems and difficulties at levels of policy, planning, implementation, and administration. Internal constraints refer to problems associated with the school system, content, curriculum, medium of instruction, pedagogy, academic supervision, monitoring, and teacher-related problems. The third set of problems relate to the social, economic, and cultural background of Tribes and psychological problems of first-generation learners.

### Methodology:-

The exploratory study is based on intensive fieldwork in which both primary and secondary data will be collected by using focus group discussion and personal interviews with stakeholders. The study will incorporate the Quantitative and Qualitative dimensions for analyses making it a Mixed-Method Research Analysis. The Mixed Method paradigm adopted calls for triangulation of results obtained from multiple sources, and the same is followed for the study.

Suitable techniques and strategies according to the objectives will be used for the study. The participants consist of 500 Tribal youths (18 to 24 years of age) across Kerala. Random sampling methods will be used for selecting participants for the study. Appropriate tools and techniques according to the objectives will be used for collecting data.

### Analysis and Interpretation

#### Scheduled Tribes in Kerala:

Like elsewhere, each tribal community in Kerala has its own unique culture, beliefs, livelihood strategies, social organization, economy and developmental perspective (Babu, 2013). Compared to national conditions, the scheduled tribes population of Kerala has better demographic indicators

**Table 1.4:-** Comparison of Demographic Indicators Between India and Kerala 2011.

Indicators	India	Kerala
Percentage to Total Population	8.6	8.6
Decade Growth Rate	23.7	33.1
Child Population to Total Population	16	11.2
Literacy Rate	58.96	75.81
Female Literacy	49.35	71.1
Male Literacy	68.53	80.76
Sex Ratio (Rural)	991	1031
Sex Ratio (Urban)	980	1070
Sex Ratio (Total)	991	1035
Infant Mortality Rate (Rural)	85	60
Infant Mortality Rate (Urban)	61	44
Infant Mortality Rate (Total)	84	60

Source: Population Census (2011) (Shabeer & Krishnan, 2017)

### Role of Economy in Increasing Participation of Tribal Students in Higher Education:

The nature of need that determines the type and level of education is generally determined by the learner's economic environment and the future economic engagement he wishes to commit to. The economic environment is more than the economic capability to afford a particular education; it is also about the nature of the most vibrant economic activity that is going on where the learner is living. As agriculture, the gathering of forest goods, and hunting are the principal means of living for those traditionally termed 'tribal people', their economic environment is primarily dependent upon the same. None of these occupations requires complex mathematical or mechanical knowledge, communication skills, or any kind of linguistic or philosophical understanding. What they really demand is apprenticeship training with experienced workers. But if the principal aim of state policy is to cultivate a civilised lifestyle among tribals, then it will try to inculcate the concepts of present modern education in them, which may contradict the expectations of the majority of the expected beneficiaries. Hence, these expected beneficiaries will get disinterested in such educational processes and will try to drop out of this kind of educational process. This cannot

be treated as a fault on the part of the tribal people. Their visualisation of the world is limited by geographical boundaries. Without creating a meaningful ambience through vast exposure to the outside world, the vision of the world will not change among the tribal people. The following comment of Maniyan, who belongs to the Paniya community in Valat (near Mananthavady, in Wayanad district) is a testimony to the world vision of these people.

"Two generations ago, my people lived beyond those hills. My grandfather was the tribal chief at that time. During his time, we received more land to cultivate here in the 1960s and moved from there. Still, our temple and graveyard are there only. We do not go for jobs in other lands. We have sufficient land here to cultivate, and we are collecting medicinal plants from forests for doctors outside. Our world ends there. Beyond Pulppalli is their world. That do not belong to us."

These words reflect not only tribal people's vision of the outside world, but also their fear of it. They, particularly youngsters, are aware of the economic opportunities, lifestyles, goods, and services that are available in mainstream society and in market places, which they too wish to experience. Many of them, especially youngsters, are going outside as a routine practice, but their curiosity has always been rewarded with bad experiences due to their cultural differences with the mainstream society or the discriminating mentality of privileged people outside. Hence, older people wish to go outside only as a group and only on special occasions. They usually go to festivals in Kottiyur, Thirunelly, and Valliyoorkkavu as a group. These festivals are their biggest exposure to urban culture and marketing. They attend these festivals either as sellers of forest goods, handicrafts, wild honey, and others, or as pilgrims, or both. Festivals in these temples are something they have actively and jointly participated continuously and consistently for generations. This is the maximum of their economic participation in mainstream society. As their economic activities are rather limited, they never felt any urgent need to pursue higher and more sophisticated knowledge, which is suitable for larger economic participation in the wider mainstream world.

The above words of Maniyan also show a hint about the nature of education a tribal person requires. Typically, tribal people learn the skills and knowledge required to make a living through a form of apprenticeship. As they are engaging in agriculture and animal husbandry, the youngsters can learn job skills through their exposure to older people who have done that job for a long time. It is also a way of life. Hence, for those who are exposed only to such occupations and their associated knowledge, modern education is both incompatible and awkward. Not only are the contents strange to them, but so is the presentation of this education. Putting those, who wander in open spaces, for long hours in classrooms and teaching in an unfamiliar language or dialect about unfamiliar objects and concepts is like imprisonment. The nineteen year-old Kadali, who is the granddaughter of Maniyan, expressed the same feeling without any ambiguity. She is the first woman to go to college from their hamlet.

"I got into the Government College in Mananthavady for BA English without much difficulty. There were other tribal students in my class, but most of us never enjoyed that subject like other Christian or Hindu students. Neither English nor history were understandable. They made me bored. It was really unexpected. I completed my high school education at MRS Pookode and my higher secondary education at an aided school in Nalloornadu. When I reached college, I realised the limitations of my educational understanding. Schooling gave very little to me. Now that I have discontinued my college studies but am not good at any jobs like other girls here. They are very skilled in farming and other jobs, and I am at the losing edge now."

Kadali was a union member in her first year of college, but she discontinued her education in between, partially because of mental stress. Considering her community standards, her academic performances are exceptionally good. She is lucky to have state support from the primary classes onward, but the casualty was in her employable skills related to her community's traditional occupations. She hardly got opportunities to get skilled in farming, animal husbandry, or gathering medicinal plants from the forest. Her family members also discouraged her from doing so because they, too, wished to see her only as a government employee. The school life in Pookode MRS was a comfortable zone for her. Despite its many infrastructure limitations, MRS provides several safeguards to its residents. But a sudden exposure to a more urbanised government college in Mananthavady town was a cultural shock for her. Academically, English, history, and other subjects never motivated her. As a result of the absence of any encouragement in the academic atmosphere and the lack of opportunity to practise any economically helpful vocational skills, she felt that education had been a losing endeavour for her so far.

Whether education is capable of providing economic independence to a tribal person is an important issue to address. A scheduled tribe student with a higher secondary certificate may easily obtain a permanent government

job, but such a job will be in the class three or four categories. A more pressing issue is that very few tribal students are reaching even such lower positions, and the number of appointments in the government sector is shrinking year after year. Hence, providing vocational education is becoming more relevant considering the absence of other supporting factors in an otherwise non-vocational ordinary education system. The following observation of Kannan, who is a resident of Kottoor in Thiruvananthapuram district, supports this argument,

"From the 8<sup>th</sup> standard onward, I learned several vocational skills from school. My school provided a lab technology course, and I too learned it. Instead of going to college after finishing plus two, I enrolled in ITI at Mithranikethan in Vellanadu. There I studied computer, agricultural technology, and machine repairing. Along with that, I privately worked in a press at Kattakkada for experience. When I finished that course, I was appointed as a full-time employee in that press itself. Now, I have been working there for the last 16 years with a decent salary."

Kannan is a member of the Kani (Kanikkar) community. His parents were agricultural labourers and dropped out of school in the primary classes. Kannan, incidentally, got formal training in vocational skills with valid certificates. His elder brother, Kishore, works as a manual labourer on a rubber plantation, and his younger sister, Archana, is a housewife. Kishore was a dropout in the 8<sup>th</sup> standard and Archana discontinued education as she got married after the 10<sup>th</sup> standard. After becoming the mother of two children, she managed to pass her 12th standard last year and has now joined the same press as an apprenticeship trainee. Archana also agreed that vocational education helped her to get a job nowadays.

During the focus group discussions at different places, many participants expressed the relevance of academic materials that are helping students relate to them. This also emphasises the importance of developing a variety of higher education curricula that include employment opportunities for the least exposed tribal communities. During one such discussion conducted at Vazhikadavu, on the far eastern side of Malappuram district, Sajeevan, who belongs to the Malapanickar community and is currently working as a tribal welfare officer, made the following comment:

"The circumstances and educational requirements for a tribal student are completely different from those of mainstream society. It is not different in the case of vocational education either. The syllabus of vocational education is also designed to address the needs of the capital market. That is hardly meaningful in tribal communities. What they need is skillful training in modern agricultural practises and handicrafts. But such courses are not available in their locality, according to requirements. Even in the available institutes, it is difficult for tribal students to get admission."

Sajeevan is a close associate of Cheruvayal Raman, the famous Kurichiya tribe member who is preserving traditional farming methods and around forty kinds of indigenous paddy seeds without any external support. He is referring to the need for developing an alternative approach to tribal education, particularly from the secondary level onward. As educational exposure of a community is a gradual process, it will be smart if they are first introduced into those disciplines which will help them to fetch a decent way of living in their immediate environment itself. As a result, exposing them to organic farming, dairy technology, agri-technology, meat technology, watershed management, horticulture, aquaculture, beekeeping, animal husbandry, and agribusiness increases their chances of continuing their education. From the institutional side, there should be a move to introduce valid certificate courses on the above subjects at the degree level. But in the focus group meetings, both there and elsewhere, others rejected the idea of placing vocational courses at the centre of tribal education. They argued that such a move would make tribals the society's permanent manual workers. Social progress in tribal communities will never be realized then. They also pointed out that short-term courses on the above are already provided through different agencies like the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Department, the Tribal Welfare Department, the Forest Department, and the Industrial Development Boards. Workshops are also conducted from time to time, focusing on the above. Chandran was one of those who spoke out against the vocationalization of tribal education in one of the focus group meetings. He belongs to the Kurumba community in the Attappady region of Palakkad district and is an upper primary school teacher. What he said is given below,

"One's position in society's hierarchical ladder is now greatly determined by the education he receives. If one is trained in only vocational skills, he may be able to find a job easily, and it may help him to create a respectable position within the community too. However, the same process will make it more difficult for him to move up the social ladder of acceptance in society. It is true that the existing education is not helping the student relate it to his

surroundings or experience. However, this is true for the vast majority of students in society. That means lack of familiarity with the educational content is only one reason for educational backwardness among tribal students. More serious issues are the geographical distance to colleges and the social and financial constraints on affording higher education among the tribal masses. Right now, they require more and urgent attention."

The high cost of education and tribal households' financial constraints continue to be major reasons for their educational backwardness. Higher education is more expensive than school education. This is not because public expenditure on higher education is far less than that on school education; the very nature of higher education makes it expensive. The diversity in disciplines, the requirement of specialization, the vastness of quality parameters, and others are very decisive in determining this increased cost of higher education. The reservation of seats for scheduled tribe students promises only opportunities, not a reduction in the cost of education. The financial relaxation provided by the tuition fee is not sufficient to address the financial challenges of education altogether. The comment of Sharadha, who is a representative of the Mala Arayan community and a political activist, exposes this truth. She belongs to Devikulam in Idukki district and is currently pursuing her doctoral research on the representation of tribal culture in Malayalam novels.

"Education is a package. It is not only about the time spent in classrooms. To become successful, a student needs to go beyond the classroom in search of knowledge. Hence, he needs nutritional food, decent clothing, high quality study materials, hygienic living conditions, decent entertainment facilities, and many more. All of them are not cheap. The government is providing a lump-sum amount of rupees every month to us, which is a big support but not at all sufficient. Sometimes we won't get that money due to bureaucratic issues. Do you remember that during the pandemic period, due to the absence of financial capacity, the most affected ones were only tribals?"

Sharda did not mention the cost of transportation, which may not be intentional, but her explanation points out two things. Firstly, there is a real need to support the educational circumstances of a student in order to make him a successful student. Secondly, the limitation of financial support provided by the state machinery at present. The above observation points out one of the crucial issues of tribal affirmative action for the upliftment of tribal communities in India. If tribal students are expected to perform in an educational framework that is designed in accordance with the cultural capital of urban privileged sections, they need an exclusive supporting mechanism. The state should provide a supporting infrastructure that truly addresses the requirements of tribal students. Additionally, they should get a more meaningful financial stipend to keep their presence in education, particularly when moving higher. The geographical access to institutes of higher education is an equally important matter. What Vinaya said in the following about the geographical distance to higher education facilities is exposing a very serious issue too.

"Several self-financed colleges came around Kulathupuzha in the last 20 years, but still we depend on Iqbal College, Palode or Mananiya College, Pangode for our higher education, which is far away from here. It is because of the cost of education. The distance to public colleges is a serious barrier for us. The gravity of the issue is increasing in the case of women. For instance, sometimes we need to go to the main university office in Thiruvananthapuram for office-related things. That travel is not only costly, but also time-consuming. Usually on those days, we return back to Kulathupuzha in the late evening only."

Vinaya is a postgraduate student of history at Iqbal College, Palode (Thiruvananthapuram district). She belongs to the Mannan community and resides in Kulathupuzha, Kollam district. She needs to travel for around seventy kilometres to access her education on a daily basis. The bus concession provided by the state government was only recently reinstated after being suspended during the pandemic days. The regular travel expenses may force poor parents to withdraw all their support for their children's studies.

In general, tribal people begin to support their families around the age of twelve, either through their occupation or through household activities. The boys are expected to earn their own income by reaching around 15 to 16 years of age. If the educational stimulus provided by the government is less than the income earned through employment, tribal youth will drop out. In the case of women, it is more complex. The expense of marriage is a pressing concern of parents of girl child even among tribals. Women will be discouraged from pursuing higher education if it does not guarantee immediate and decent employment and is prohibitively expensive.

During focus group discussions, participants also pointed out the lack of will demonstrated by public sector banks in providing student loans to those who belong to scheduled tribes. Bank officers frequently argue that scheduled tribes

students are not usually able to complete their courses on time or find work that pays enough to repay the loan. Even though government is considered to guarantee every educational loans in general and in case of marginalized communities particularly, hardly any banks extend loan facilities for their higher education. The bank authorities also agreed this out of the record. They are aware about the policy initiative about government guarantee on educational loans taken from public sector banks, but there is no official order given to any bank managers about the same. Without a proper directive, the managers cannot take the risk of sanctioning any educational loans without any valid collaterals. As tribal families often lack valuable collateral securities to present, they usually end up in denial of loans.

### **Role of Politics in Increasing Participation of Tribal Students in Higher Education:**

Every societal activity is influenced and shaped by the philosophy of politics and the nature of political institutions. The philosophy of politics refers to both the dominant and minor concepts (idea or ideology) that created a specific set of opinions, policies, laws, regulations, judgements, and consciousnesses, as well as those that later reshaped them. All institutional mechanisms associated with or created anew by the above-referred philosophy are considered as political institutions. They create a political space by working together. The content, structure, language, and thrust areas of this political space will change from time to time, which in turn constructs, deconstructs, or shapes the associated communities and wider society along with them. Similarly, the political space of the time has an impact on the scheduled tribe community. All those relevant studies pointed out the role of political variables and institutions in creating the present format of tribal issues.

The dominant political philosophy in our society highlights and reason with the concept of 'survival of the fittest'. In essence, it justifies the vertical structure of hierarchy, which provides power to those on the upper side. The exploitation, discrimination, and discarding of those at the bottom are all part of the same hierarchical structure, as Mahesh's words demonstrate.

"The Indian society is hierarchical in its nature. As tribal people became powerless and wealthless over time, we are now at the bottom of this structure. As a result, in all of the policies and laws enacted by those in power to strengthen this structure, tribals will be increasingly marginalized."

What Mahesh said points out one truth: the representation of tribal communities is hardly happening in the real political processes in our society. Mahesh is a research scholar in political science at Kannur University and belongs to the karimpalan community. Technically, the representation of tribes may be fulfilled, but how far the scheduled tribes can participate and decide on the various political processes is a relevant question. Mahesh attempted to critically examine that issue too.

Representation is a necessary condition. As a democratically functioning country, this representation is also reflected in all political activities. But how far are those representing tribes able to perform in the system? Either they are controlled by an upper authority or they are not capable enough."

What Mahesh said indicates two things. Firstly, members of scheduled tribes are able to achieve positions in society as individuals. Secondly, those who are able to manage such positions are not trying to address the larger problems of the community. However, the above opinion may not reflect the real picture. But the anger and disappointment of the tribal youth over the neglect of tribals by the larger political structure is evident in those remarks.

Higher education is one of the most important litmus tests for larger political operations because it creates and influences each other at the same time. The relatively lower representation of scheduled tribes in higher education is not a historical accident but a product of political evolution. Getting eligible to access higher education technically requires successful completion of school education, where scheduled tribe students participate and perform relatively less. The nature and structure of the Indian education system are not designed to incorporate scheduled tribes. As they are constructed to develop a skilled and disciplined labour force for the urbanised production centres, the mainstream educational institutions cannot promote the interests of those in the villages and other remote areas. The strangeness felt in educational institutions even after going through it for years is sarcastically shared by Mani, who belongs to Koragar community in Kasargod.

"College is like a circus. It will surprise and entertain us. But once it is over, we are left with nothing. Can you make it like a Theyyam?"

Several students expressed their dissatisfaction with college. That strangeness is continuing even when they are passing out. From the physical structure of colleges to the socialisation process to the learning contents, this strangeness exists. At the height of that feeling, most of them either lose interest in their studies or drop out. What Mani said above reflects that. College life is not able to provide anything substantial to tribal students. The politics of higher education are becoming contested terrain at this juncture.

At the outset, the present dominant education is sufficient to address the circumstances and needs of tribal people. It is designed in one format that is more suitable for those living in urban environments. This strangeness is exposed by Jyothi with an example.

"It is six students sitting on one bench. There are five coats in my hostel room. Everything is so congested there. The hot climate, noise, dust, and sitting in the classroom for long hours. Most of what is taught in classrooms is incomprehensible."

The educational system in India is not encouraging diversity, even in its modes of presentation. Those who have grown up in large open spaces may struggle for years to adjust to small spaces. Jyothi is a bachelor's degree student in English literature at Kerala Varma College (Thrissur district) and represents the Kadar community. What she points out is the importance of a tribal education policy. Such a policy can address the concerns of tribals in higher education and can act as a bridge between them and the non-tribal society outside.

The demand for such a policy was long contested. But such a move can address those long-standing issues like the incorporation of tribal-based learning materials, tribal-friendly curricula and syllabuses, the establishment of higher education centres in and around tribally dominated regions, the incorporation of suitable vocational education in the syllabus, and others. Rajeev, a Gothra Maha Sabha activist who is pursuing a post-graduate degree in history at Calicut University, responded to the above concern.

"Tribal education policy does not refer to a new kind of education system per se. It is a structural attempt to fill the existing gap in educational attainment among tribals. It ensures more content on tribal-related aspects. Exclusive disciplines on tribal knowledge are also expected from that. But most important is that it ensures greater accessibility for scheduled tribes in the education sector. The entire structure will be 'tribal friendly'."

Rajeev belongs to Malayan community in Kakkad (Malappuram district). According to him, tribal education policy guarantees more familiar educational contents and ambience to tribal students. It can help them connect more with education. Such a policy demands greater efforts from educators and academicians in developing curricula, syllabuses, and contents. They will need the active assistance of those from the scheduled tribes to accomplish this. As there are not many studies conducted on tribal-related matters, such a policy presents a big challenge.

"Construction of new materials based on scheduled tribes is not an easy task. It requires funding and dedicated resources. However, such an effort will aid in the creation and training of a large number of academicians from within the community."

The above words of Seetha, who received an MA in International Relations from Kerala Central University (Kasargod district) show the impact of such a policy on the scheduled tribe community. She belongs to Paniyar community of Kolakkadu in Kannur district. One of the constraints to the presence of scheduled tribes in higher education is a lack of real academic exposure. Through the above-mentioned efforts, they will be exposed to both academic adventure and academicians. However the biggest challenge is who will propagate for a tribal education policy. The organisational strength of tribal communities is more or less limited; hence, their slogans may not get attention. Such a situation exposes the need to strengthen the institutional mechanisms associated with scheduled tribes. An inter-community tribal organisation that brings together the various scheduled tribes communities with equal spirit is required here.

The hierarchical placement of communities is very strong among the scheduled tribes too. The Kurichiyar tribe of Wayanad district, for example, considers itself to be the most superior and is even referred to as 'Hill Brahmins'. They observe the highest levels of ritual purity, considering the touch of other tribes as polluting. In such circumstances, the progressive social movements should address the divisions among them and make them a unified force.



Strengthening Oorukkoottam and ensuring maximum participation of scheduled tribes in concerned grama sabha meetings is also necessary. The participants should be informed about the agenda in advance, and they should be trained to intervene in discussion. What Sreejesh (Kadar community) of Vicoria College (Palakkad district) said is more relevant.

"There are many limitations for Oorukkoottams and Grama sabha to address issues in higher education. Student unions and academic seminars are better suited for that. Students' unions in colleges and universities can bring to the attention of educational authorities about the unresolved complaints of tribal students. Academic exercises like conferences, seminars, workshops, and symposiums can present such issues directly to representatives of the state. Such efforts can better ensure the socialisation of tribal students and their subsequent incorporation into mainstream education."

But how far are members of scheduled tribes responding to the existing reports and policies? Ram Kumar, a student political activist from a left-leaning ideology at Iqbal College, Peringamala (Thiruvananthapuram district) raised this issue during the focus group discussion.

"How far are we able to address the National Knowledge Commission Report, the Committee to Advice on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education in India, or the New Education Policy 2020 from the perspective of scheduled tribes? Who will put forward our concerns with regard to these policy matters? Without it, how will the public learn about our problems? How many of us are aware of their contents? How many of us know whether or not they mentioned us?"

Ram Kumar (Ulladan tribe) is a local-level leader of one of the principal left parties in Madathara, Thiruvananthapuram district too. What he raised is a very serious matter. Reports of the National Knowledge Commission, the Committee to Advice on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education in India, and others had a significant impact on subsequent higher education reforms. The new National Education Policy restructured the entire educational system and thereby affected the academic lives of all students, including those among the scheduled tribes.

Privatization of the higher education sector started in Kerala in the late nineties. Now most of the newly established institutions in the higher education sector are in self-financing mode. Even aided and government colleges began self-financing courses. Now it has become very normal. However, such changes have resulted in an increase in the cost of education and, as a result, a decrease in the number of students from marginalised communities, including scheduled tribes, gaining access to higher education. The dominant politics of privatisation are influencing the state and other political institutions. Most job-related courses, such as nursing, medicine, engineering, and management, are now mostly self-financed. As the scheduled tribes' pupils cannot accommodate themselves to the fee structure of these institutions, they find themselves incapable of pursuing any of these courses or jobs. This will gradually lead to the mere marginal presence of scheduled tribes in higher education, particularly in the professional and highly skilled job sector.

The establishment of coaching centres for civil service and other competitive examinations is an encouraging move from the state government. The SC-ST department has been running such facilities for those in marginalised communities for some years. The centres like those in Thiruvananthapuram are in addition to the exclusive training given to scheduled tribe students by the ST department at the Kerala State Civil Service Academy (Thiruvananthapuram). The programme includes free accommodation and food as well. However, the community is not as enthusiastic about the state administration's response to such initiatives. The comment of Thushara who is from Kattappana (Idukki district) is presenting something the government should consider.

"It is definitely good that the state government is providing such educational support to us. But they are only tokens. How many of us are getting such support everywhere? Only a select few. Second, why is the government running such centres in the cities of Thiruvananthapuram, Thrissur or Kannur? If you're really interested, should you open them at Kattappana, Kulathuppuzha, Nilambur, Nedumangad, Agali or Mananthavady? When we inquired, they stated that high-quality resource personnel would not be available. If you cannot arrange such facilities in these locations, how can you make the positive changes intended?"

Thushara belongs to Malayarayan community. She attended such coaching centres too. Her remarks show the other side of such supporting programmes. What she pointed out is the selection of urban centers, which are far away from tribal areas, for providing such coaching. Even though hundreds of students are doing residential education by staying at hostels in these cities, such facilities will be more beneficial if they are geographically located near to tribal dominant areas.

The adverse tendencies in socialisation are another area where politics of opinion are influential. The hidden or unconscious prejudice against the scheduled tribes is working to keep them away from personnel gatherings or other associations with those in the mainstream. Behind the hierarchical distribution of communities is the politics of elitism. Those on the upper side discriminate as well as exploit those in the lower strata. As those standing in the lowest of caste system, the scheduled tribes are rejected by all. The dialect of their talk, the colour of their skin and body features, their lack of knowledge about modern living styles and manners, etc. also act as barriers to mingle with them. This dominant public mentality can be broken only through a calculated and vibrant political stand.

"Mere slogans of renaissance will not change this bigoted system. Intensive political decisions should be made instead of peripheral speeches. Progressive political movements and the government should make it a priority to include scheduled tribes in every formal and informal platform and gathering."

The above words of Ajith, a member of Paniyar community in Iritty (Kannur district) is clear about what they expect from a politically vibrant society. Only a progressively spirited and politically dynamic community can create teaching and non-teaching staff in colleges who can motivate a larger community of students to adventurously challenge the existing notions of discrimination in support of the emancipation of the downtrodden. The state should also facilitate counselling and training for current staff to better approach students from scheduled tribes.

Any university is a political institution. The establishment of an university is an investment in all avenues of society, and it will guarantee constructive and lasting impacts there. When the establishment of the university is exclusive to something like the development of a region or the progress of a particular community, it will be the reflection of a mature political will. The members of the scheduled tribes are well aware of the need for an exclusive tribal university in the state.

"An exclusive university for the tribals is not a strange phenomenon in India as there are tribal universities already. Plus, in Kerala itself, there are exclusive universities for language and particular trades. Scheduled tribes, too, represent a distinct way of life. Such a university will help to preserve our language and knowledge and provide more confidence to interact with the larger society."

The above comment is made by Vinod of Paniyar community in Aralam, Kannur district. According to him, a tribal university will be a great leap forward in the contemporary histories of both the scheduled tribes and the state. Such steps will help to end the inter-community clashes within the scheduled tribes. The unevenness experienced in the attainment of benefits from government programmes can be addressed to some extent by creating more opportunities. The scheduled tribes do not constitute a homogenous social group as they are fragmented in linguistics and regional considerations. So, to represent them politically as a community is a tedious task. As they are scattered in different districts, following different customs and traditions, they may face different problems as well. As a result, in order to understand this community and bring educational development, political institutions must reach the grassroots of each sub-community.

The continued exclusion of the tribal people in diverse fields, including education, is related to the prevailing politics in Kerala. Although the political parties have the idea of transforming our society into a casteless society, how practical and successful that thought has been is yet to be questioned. Even the own organisations of scheduled tribes communities are organised along party lines. So, the caste-based agenda got submerged in the broader political agenda of the parties.

### **Discussion:-**

Understanding the socio-economic circumstances, as well as the expectations and anxieties about higher education, is the first step towards ensuring mass entry into the sector. The geographical division among them, in addition to traditional beliefs about social distancing within, is making them less accessible to diverse state provisions extended to them in association with higher education. Expecting them to successfully utilise facilities like higher education

with the same magnitude as non-tribal people is illogical. Socialisation is the appropriate mechanism in such circumstances. It is the technique of internalising and adopting the perspective of others. Continuous interaction and exposition are the meaningful methods of doing so.

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