

## A Holistic Approach to Tribal Education

by Shreesh Chaudhary

*Tribal Education: Issues and Problems*  
by N.K. Ambasht  
Delhi: Venkatesh Prakashan, 2001

N.K. Ambasht's *Tribal Education: Problems and Issues* appears at a time when the tribals and the tribal ethos have become a cliché. Cliché in the sense that while everything tribal evokes an immediate stereotypical response, the ground reality remains conveniently forgotten. India is believed to have the highest tribal population; only all of Africa together exceeds India in it. In fact, all our states and union territories have sizeable tribal population and roughly speaking every 12th Indian is an *Adivasi* (see Pandya 1999 for details). Yet they remain a generally neglected, backward, despising and despised community, even after the independence. One of the most significant reasons for this situation is the tardy progress of education among the tribals. It is here that the book under review, focusing on the primal issues of tribal education, comes at an opportune time when it has become necessary to explore the reasons, call for an appreciative understanding of the crux of the problem before a solution could be formulated and implemented.

The tribal community continues to be among the least educated—the average literacy is less than 30 per cent, for tribal women it is less than 19 per cent, according to 1991 Census (see Verma 1990/95: 90). Higher education, technical and technological education, specialised education, and other accomplishments are yet to come to this community in a substantial manner.

Ambasht uses a variety of statistical evidence from Census of India and other records in India and abroad to make a convincing case for better formulation and implementation of a holistic policy for tribal education.

Tribals in India have a constitutionally guaranteed special status. There are

special provisions for special steps for them. But even though this status has been granted with one stroke of pen, steps for their upliftment remain to have the desired effect. Even after 50 years of independence they are as poor and illiterate as they were in the British India. Something surely must be done to remove this anomaly.

The first step would be to formulate a policy sensitive to the needs of tribal education. Directive Principles of the Constitution of India call for universal education and that would also include education for the tribals. In addition, both the central and the state governments have been from time to time coming up with their policies and formulations to overcome the special challenge of tribal education.

Many recommendations have come in from time to time, yet very little seems to have really changed. It may be because of the massive dropout, or as the book calls it, "non-retention". For example, in the case of Lanjia Saora of Orissa, the NCERT found out that upto 97% students either failed or dropped out (p.4) between classes one and three. In many other tribal communities too this figure is not much smaller.

There are, as the book rightly says, two reasons for this. The major reason for "this tremendous percentage of dropout" is economic. As soon as the child is old enough to help in any manner from collecting firewood to selling them, or by working as unskilled labour, or at least by minding the younger siblings, he is withdrawn from school. Going to school makes this child an economic liability, rather than an asset. If the parents or others in the family were educated enough they could see that some patience and investment of hope and opportunity

in the child today could help it make a big economic gain tomorrow, but then the average tribal parent has little education and still less capacity to think beyond the present.

The book cites yet another reason for the reluctance of the tribal parents to invest in their children's education. The kind of education these children receive in the city schools and colleges alienates them from their parent culture. They look down upon it, or at least sound apologetic about being a tribal. They do not participate in the community life, they prefer an industrial-urban lifestyle. Ambasht's observations amply illustrate the point:

Today in Ranchi, or in its subdivisions, Cinema, TV or Video has an important place in the entertainment of the educated tribal youth. In Simdega, the cinema "was mostly packed with tribal educated youth. The dress had markedly changed. No tribal student will now be found wearing the traditional tribal dress, unless it is special occasion when they cannot do without it. Modern tribal students are found wearing dresses which are in fashion of the day, though if one visits their home one will find that their houses have not changed very much from their traditional style" (p. 23).

Education currently given to them has also encouraged migration from rural to the urban and industrial life styles. The result is the neglect of the handicraft, agriculture and the traditional arts and crafts. The book cites an interesting conversation with an Oraon in a village in Ranchi (p. 52). He said that his son did not go to the school, but his neighbour's son did. The experience of that family has "deterred" him from sending his children to school.

After passing the school, the neighbour said, the "child left for Ranchi for some job. He could become a *chaprasi*. He married a Christian Oran girl and is living there. The family is in great economic trouble as the child is not contributing to the family economy and also not helping the parents in the field (agriculture). He also does not like to come and stay with his parents, as he thinks working in office, even as *chaprasi*, is better in status than working in his father's paddy field. His income is not even sufficient for him and his wife, so he keeps on making demands on the already meager agricultural produce of his old parents. Instead of becoming a support to old parents, he turns out to be a liability. Also he has converted to Christianity to marry a Christian girl. So education has brought only misery than any relief to his family. Our own *Dhukuria*, I feel, was better as it did not wean away our children from us".

In answer to another question the same tribal further said, "... It is making our children learn to read and write, no doubt. But at the same time it is not our education. It is your education Babu, you are snatching our children and making them *Diku* (outsider). They start to look down upon us after education. They want to leave everything that is our identity. Are we not human! You do not teach them our language, our culture and our way of life. You are making them aliens in our own homes" (pp. 52-3).

This is not an exclusive experience of this person in this tribe. Aborigines elsewhere in the world have also experienced similar migration of their children to the culture of the dominant community. An Alaskan Red Indian tells the author (pp. 52-3).

... The education that is provided to our children is determined by those in lower 48 (meaning 48 mainland states of the USA). They wean our children from our society. Those who get educated are attracted to jobs in lower 48, leave us and go there and not contribute to our life either socially or materially. The values they acquire

during schooling process are diametrically opposite to our values – we are basically communally oriented, sharing each other's joys and sorrows while they are out and out materialistic and individualistic. With this kind of education I wonder how long will we be able to retain our identity?

The author makes a convincing case for the need for any scheme of tribal education in India to be sensitive to this aspect of the modern European education's effect on the parent culture of tribal students. Without such a sensitivity, no scheme is likely to be received enthusiastically by the tribals.

Yet another area of conflict and concern in the present curriculum of tribal education is the medium of instruction and the content of language education.

Most schools in tribal regions today impart education only in the regional language medium which is alien to the tribal child. This not only deprives the child from getting teachers from the tribal community itself, it also prevents the child from learning his own mother tongue better. All tribal languages in India, therefore, are threatened languages, about to have only very few or no speakers soon (See Mehrotra, 1999 and Vines, 1996 for details).

This is a ticklish problem, i.e. how to impart education, including language education, for the larger world, larger than the one already known to the child, such that the child is fully prepared to be an active citizen of a larger world without losing his local identity.

This then means that languages like English and Hindi, for example, are not only desirable, they are inevitable for any member of the tribal community to participate in a larger world as an equal. Young tribals, somehow, seem to recognize this fact, even if their elders do not approve of it. In a survey of language preference among tribal students at Ranchi in 1980, nearly 99% of about a hundred respondents claimed that good

job and good education could not be had without "good" English (see Chaudhary, 1989).

It is therefore unavoidable that the tribal youth must also be educated in these languages. There may be several approaches to giving this kind of language education. One approach may be to give primary education in the mother tongue of the learner, and the secondary and higher education in Hindi/another regional language and English respectively. This way the learner gets adequate language education for all the world or worlds s/he may find himself/herself in. In his famous dispatch of 1854, Sir Charles Wood, then President of the Court of Directors of the East India Company, had recommended this scheme for the Indian education. It has also been tried in many parts of the country since then and has produced encouraging results. This could be tried for the tribal education in India on a larger scale. Though the book makes a convenient case for an effective education to the tribals, it offers no solution for or insight into this problem. Yet, it could be said that the work is a valuable study in the field and it can be read with profit; though not always for pleasure, by all concerned.

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