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Research Article

Jayashree Doley

Exploring the Many Meanings of Being an Educated Tribal

Abstract

Scholarly literature on tribes, for a long time, has been reeling under a pervasive colonial and caste gaze, that has resulted in the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes about tribes among non-tribes and epistemological distortion in the way tribes themselves construct their existential concerns. Two kinds of concerns have generally seen tribes being accommodated in problematic ways – firstly, the discourse on modernity and change, which saw education as bringing tribes closer to the mainstream or towards secular values, and secondly, the theme of inequality, which tends to subsume tribal concerns within caste issues. It is therefore not surprising that whenever the term "tribal" is used colloquially, the notion of an "educated tribal" feels like an oxymoron to the general public, as if the process of education is inconsistent with the retainment of a tribal identity. This paper is an exploratory attempt to answer the question of what it means to be a tribal in Indian educational institutions. Tribes, I argue, are to be seen as a group of people who, while occupying a wide gamut of spaces and social locations, also have a distinct kind of social, political, economic and educational journey or movement, owing to their identity as tribes.

Keywords: Tribes, inequality, social change, higher education, tribal identity

Introduction

The term "tribal" in common parlance evokes certain images in people. They are seen as being in a state of abject poverty or otherwise inhabiting areas away from civilization. It is therefore difficult for the general public to comprehend encounters with so-called "educated tribals," living "normally" among them. It is an aberration and a complete betrayal of their understanding of tribes. A corollary to this then becomes a negation of their tribal identity, which would have been otherwise allowed had they remained "backward." It is this understanding of tribes that needs a major overhaul in public discourse. Tribes, I argue, are to be seen as a group of people that can occupy a wide gamut of spaces and social locations, and

Author: Jayashree Doley, Department of Education, University of Delhi, India.
Email: doleyjayashree@gmail.com

yet have a distinct kind of social, political, economic and educational journey owing to their identity as tribes. This paper then is an attempt to answer the question of what it means to be a tribal in Indian educational institutions. What kinds of experiences and anxieties characterise their educational journeys? What are their aspirations, or what do they hope to achieve through education? How does education end up impacting their lives? The community I will be looking at is a tribe called the Misings, although officially still recognised by their exonym, Miri. With a population of about 7 lakhs, they are the second largest Scheduled Tribe (ST) group in Assam after the Bodos.

The question under consideration in this paper is posed in the context of two larger ongoing debates – one on educational inequality in India and the other related to the role that education has been assumed to play in the integration of tribes into the larger Indian mainstream society. I draw from Xaxa's (1999, 2001, 2005) seminal papers to show how the framing of these debates suffers from an absence of a tribal perspective or what Bodhi (2024) calls "a perspective from within," and try to remedy it through this study.

This paper specifically looks at narratives from Mising students in higher education, because that is where their agency, aspirations and future career and livelihood prospects get more defined as compared to school education. At the time of conducting the interviews (2018-2019), they were pursuing their undergraduate studies. Six people were selected for the study through purposive sampling. Belonging to the community myself, I made use of the community networks available to me – mostly principals of colleges, and student organisations. I approached them and after having described the objective of my study, enlisted their help in identifying suitable participants for my study. It was ensured that there was adequate representation at all the levels of rural and urban regions, and that there were both male and female respondents at each level. The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, where I wanted them to reflect upon some broader questions (as mentioned earlier) I posed to them. But eventually I let them take control of the narrative around key events in their educational journey. The resulting narratives were then organised and analysed thematically.

Tribes and Higher Education

Two kinds of concerns emerge within studies that have looked at tribes in higher education. One concern is that of stratification in Indian society and its educational implications for

historically marginalised groups like the Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC). Related to this is the question of whether education has been able to bring any change to the status quo. Another set of concerns is related to change within tribal society, and the role that education has played in that change.

Education and Change in Tribal Society

In post-independence India, one can find sociological and anthropological studies that were interested in the relationship between education and social change within tribes. It was shown that the educated among the tribes became occupationally and spatially more mobile and there was an increase in articulation of political interests under new "secularized" and "urban-bred" leadership (Shah, 1979). Such a relationship between education and an emerging political consciousness among tribes was also established earlier by Dubey (1972). Besides, the small group of the educated among tribes was also linked to reform and revivalist movements, and processes of Hinduisation, Westernisation, modernisation, and detribalisation (Kamat, 1981). Larger studies on change within tribal society, though not necessarily linked to education, were looking at the peasantisation of tribes and the development of social stratification within them (Singh, 1982). In this context, it is Xaxa (1999) whose writings proved to be a watershed moment in the imagination of tribes as a distinct and separate agential independent entity. He critiqued older anthropological and sociological studies of change that failed to see tribes as communities in their own right and rather tended to look at them only in relation to caste, peasant and social stratification, the defining characteristics of the larger Indian society. This resulted unfortunately in tribes being conceptualised as merely a stage or type of society, the end point being represented by social differentiation, peasants, and castes. They were also seen as a type of society that lacks the positive traits of modern society – literacy, industrialisation and specialisation. By this logic, a tribal society would then mean a simple, primitive, illiterate and backward society. Before Xaxa, such conceptualisations dominated how scholars studied tribes. Looking at the education question using these earlier frameworks therefore meant, albeit erroneously, asking whether education had led to literacy, secularisation and modernisation of tribes.

Educational Inequality and Tribes

Meanwhile, when it comes to studies of educational inequality, although it is regularly pointed out how SCs and STs are the most vulnerable, it is caste that becomes the overarching concern. This is understandable because caste is a very prominent feature of the

larger Indian society. Also, because affirmative action like reservation shapes the higher education experience of both SCs and STs, there is bound to be an overlap of concerns. But the logic of reservations for both SCs and STs is very different from each other (Xaxa, 2001). While for SCs, this provision serves to remedy their economic disability stemming from caste-based segregation in a caste society, for STs, it is due to their isolation from this very society. However, in the whole discourse around reservations and inequality, the category of ST gets subsumed under SCs. One will find several studies that have looked at low educational attainment of SC and ST students and tried to explain it by studying caste-based exclusion and discrimination in educational spaces. Wankhede (2013) had presented both survey reports and specific case studies of different kinds of discrimination faced by Dalit students at various stages of their lives, and their consequences at social and psychological levels – identity crisis, isolation, lowered self-confidence, humiliation, depression, dropouts, and failure. Rao (2013) tries to explain academic failure and maladjustment of SC and ST students in elite institutions using the reproduction theory – how discriminatory practices against individuals belonging to such groups are actually socially legitimised to ensure their exclusion and to reproduce existing hierarchies, how it is not the individual personality disposition of the SC/ST student but systemic structural discrimination that is at play. Malish and Ilavarasan (2016) too looked at the institutional context of educational experiences of SC students, and argued how different institutional cultures result in different student experiences and how the institutional culture in turn is defined by factors such as the socio-political location of the institution, the institute's mission, the background of students and teachers, academic and management structures, and institutional receptivity. Such studies point towards how education mirrors hierarchies that exist in the larger society. Caste being an integral organising principle for social stratification in Indian society, features prominently too in studies of educational inequality. However, data regarding employment in government services and enrolment in educational institutions show how the situation among STs is even worse than among SCs (Xaxa, 2001). This then becomes ground for a separate and independent analysis of the tribal situation.

Xaxa attempts to explain this phenomenon by emphasising the distinct structure of tribal society (Xaxa, 2001, pp. 2768–2771). In line with his earlier argument in relation to the transformation of tribes, he reiterates that tribes need to be looked at as a distinct society, having a distinct social structure, marked by a homogeneity in knowledge, skills, wealth, and status and an absence of interdependence and division of labour and occupation. Internal

stratification, if it exists, is rudimentary and clan-based. Their operating logic therefore does not fit well with how the larger society along with its educational institutions is structured. The larger caste society was based on a strict division of labour and one's occupation was pre-decided at birth. Such ascriptions resulted in groups at the lower end of the hierarchy being trapped in unwanted and degrading occupations, although they wanted to escape them. Affirmative action policies meant to remedy such caste-based ascriptions therefore provided them with that opportunity, which they effectively used to move up and pursue different occupations. Since they were in close proximity to other caste groups higher than them, and also because they shared the same language and culture with them, they could access information and also have a reference point for emulation. Also, since there was much better pan-India mobilisation compared to tribals, the reference point could be found not just outside, but also within Dalits.

With tribes, however, reservations could not work out the same way as they did with Dalits. First, they were linguistically and culturally cut off from the larger society (relatively speaking), meaning less access to information. Also, since they were complete societies in themselves, it was not just that the larger society considered them outsiders, the reverse was true as well – tribes considered members of caste society as outsiders. Moreover, because of the history of exploitation, that they have faced at their hands whenever there was contact, they did not consider them worthy of emulation. Also, due to a non-stratified internal structure, there was no internal class one could aspire to. Tribes also had to contend with an ethically inconsistent value system, where collectivism clashed with individualism and the related ethos of performance and achievement. Reservations therefore proved to be revolutionary for SCs, who, while being exposed to better jobs, could not occupy them due to caste-based barriers. Such aggressive aspiration was not seen within STs because their exploitation rather than being cultural, was more economic and political in nature. Hence, their struggle was more in the direction of securing forest and land rights, and political power. With no stigma attached to tribal occupations, as in the case of SCs, there was no urgency for abandoning traditional occupations. While industrialisation also proved to boost the social and geographical mobility of SCs, it worsened the land situation for tribes. This is not to say that reservations have been able to resolve caste-based inequalities but have yet to resolve the tribal question. Larger studies on inequality and inclusion in education (Thorat and Khan, 2023) still point towards the persistence of caste. The argument here is that while both SCs and STs continue to suffer, STs fare even worse than SCs.

Developing a Tribal Subjectivity

As mentioned before, the thrust of this paper is to look at issues in education from a distinctly tribal perspective. Banerjee (2016) points towards the ironic position of being a tribe in modernity – tribes represented as survivals of the past but not as embodiment of past histories. She argues for a new disciplinary domain called *adivasi* studies that is not just limited to the study of tribes but that could also offer a whole new lens to look at the question of democracy, land, economy, and language, and reconceptualise them. The path, she says, is riddled with challenges and disadvantages, especially when compared to Dalit studies that has been successful in producing a Dalit selfhood, subjectivity, and ethico-political practice. More recently, Bodhi (2024) has argued for a "perspective from within" and says that tribal theories done by the hegemon intentionally or unintentionally reaffirm Western and caste worldviews. What is needed instead, is an epistemology rooted in the tribal "self" to undo such acts of colonialism that have fragmented the tribal *weltanschauung*. He therefore calls for a reconceptualisation and reframing of several old unilinear narratives of modernity and development. Of significance is his dismantling of the isolation- assimilation- integration framework of understanding state-tribe relationship, and replacing it with the framework of adaptation- negotiation- freedom (Bodhi, 2024, pp. 28–34). In this new framework, freedom is the desired goal and represents one end of the spectrum, while the other end is represented by the survivalist strategy of adaptation. Freedom here is both in the epistemic-ontological sense of experiencing reality in one's own language and also in a political sense of having distinct social identity boundaries and firm control over land, forests, and water. Freedom also means tribes are ensured an organic social evolution process of their own. Under adaptation, tribes experience loss of language, blurring of social boundaries, powerlessness, identity oscillations, altered social reality, and inferiorisation of community identity. Negotiation is characterised by resistance and protest, linguistic and cultural assertions, and diminishing political rights. He also proposes a new framework for conceptualising change within tribal society. Instead of a unilinear path to modernity, with caste acting as the mediator, he emphasises on the notion of alternative paths to modernity. From this new standpoint then, a new way of understanding tribal relationship with formal education begins to emerge – what students aspire for, what they hope to gain from education, what constrains them, how they make sense of their experiences, and what happens to their tribal identity and the tribal group they belong to.

Misings in Assam: The Politico-Economic Context

While North-East India has a significant tribal population with most of its states having a tribal majority, Assam is an exception. STs constitute 12.4% of the state population. The Misings are the second most populous ST community in Assam after the Bodos. They speak the Mising language, which is part of the *Tibeto-Burman* language family. They have had a long history of waging autonomy and language movements, with the demand for Sixth Schedule still active today. Pegu (2013) has shown how the Mising identity is central to their autonomy struggles. Currently, while they do have an autonomous council of their own, called the Mising Autonomous Council (MAC), it was created under a state Act, and has limited powers compared to the autonomous councils formed under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. The MAC headquarters is located at Dhemaji. The districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Majuli, Jorhat, Golaghat, Sonitpur, Sivasagar, Tinsukia, and Dibrugarh have a significant Mising population. For political purposes, the tribes (ST) of Assam usually come together under a common umbrella, called the "plains tribes," a colonial construction, now appropriated by the tribal elites (Pathak, 2010). It is a term that distinguishes them from the "hill tribes" of the neighbouring North-Eastern states. They also distinguish themselves from the tea garden communities, who are called the "adivasis." This arrangement has been made even more complicated in recent times due to demands of six communities including the tea garden community for ST status.

The political identity of tribes (with some tribes already having Sixth Schedule status, and others still fighting) in the region has been shaped by a long history of socio-economic grievances these communities have had since the onset of the hugely disruptive colonial era policies – whether it was encouraging immigrant settlements for increasing land revenue, fundamentally changing land settlement patterns, or introducing a new cash economy (Sharma, 2001; Pathak, 2010). The result was a colossal disruption to tribal ways of life, their traditional economy, and relationship with land. Land alienation turned out to be the single most pertinent issue as was seen in the speeches of tribal leaders in the state Assembly (Pathak, 2010). The land issue has continued to afflict the lives of the Assamese tribes even after Indian independence, with now government-established irrigation and industrial complexes leading to displacement (Sharma, 2001). As the state sees new kinds of development projects being initiated in a region that is already ecologically fragile and prone to floods, the economic and livelihood options of the people see newer and newer kinds of uncertainties today. These historical disadvantages have accumulated over time to produce a

population bereft of any land or capital to secure their livelihood and completely dependent on the mercy of the state.

There are region-specific studies on how natural disasters, development projects and forest conservation laws intersect to cause a population to become economically vulnerable. The river island of Majuli (now a district), for instance, has shrunk exceptionally due to floods and erosion, registering a loss of two-thirds of its land mass in the 20th century alone. Pegu (2025) has talked about how displaced families look for vacant lands to occupy and end up in reserve forests where they are either prone to evictions or are not legally allowed to avail government schemes. Very recently, protests in the "forest" villages of Laika and Dodhiya situated in the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park had brought to light how thousands of Mising families had been rendered "rightless" due to their supposedly "illegal" status in a protected forest (Saikia, 2020; David, 2021). Forest conservation discourses often tend to turn a blind eye to the concerns of such people (Pegu & Pegu, 2018).

Dams were at one point seen to be a solution to the problem of floods and the displacement they caused. However, there has been a paradigm shift in the conceptualisation of dams as multifunctional facilities solving the twin concerns of floods and hydropower generation to dams serving the sole purpose of electricity generation (Saikia, 2019, as cited in Pegu, 2025), thus adding another dimension to the uncertainty faced by tribes. The awareness of this precarity has led to many protests, one for instance, being against the 2000 MW Subansiri Lower Hydroelectric Project (SLHEP) at the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border. These protests have highlighted issues like the dam's location in a highly seismic zone, the probability of unprecedented downstream flooding, biodiversity loss, and livelihood disruption. Although construction was halted for a brief period owing to these protests, it has now resumed. There is a constant anxiety among downstream residents that landslides which have become common after construction activities might cause dam failures or, in the event of an earthquake, even cause the dam to break leading to large-scale devastation (Pegu, 2025).

Tayeng (2021) studied the impact of development projects on the livelihoods of the Misings in Dhemaji district, where agriculture and animal husbandry are the primary occupational activities. The two villages under study, being in close proximity to the Tangani and Burisuti rivers, are prone to regular floods. The residents have therefore been modifying their

agricultural cycle in accordance with the flooding season, and choosing flood-water tolerant paddy varieties (*bao dhan*). Mustard is sometimes cultivated as a cash crop in the *chaporis,* while rice, potatoes and other vegetables are mostly grown for consumption. There is inconsistency in crop productivity due to varying duration of the flood season. There is also a trend among the villagers to opt out of paddy due to increasing floods every year. The Kareng-Bogibeel *ghats* and the ferry economy served as major alternate sources of livelihood. However, the lives of these villagers had seen a major disruption due to the construction of the Bogibeel bridge, which got completed in 2018. While in the early years of its construction, it was hailed as a developmental project that would bring prosperity to the region, the reality turned out to be a nightmare for those whose lands were acquired. A total of 19 villages were affected, including the villages in the study. Due to the confusing legalities of land ownership and rights related to different kinds of lands (homestead or agricultural land), and because people were ignorant about land *pattas*, they feel they got cheated out of proper compensation for the land acquired. About 140 *bighas* of land were acquired from 136 households in the vicinity of the construction area. Cash compensation proved to be detrimental to the villagers who were not equipped to use it judiciously or to plan alternate livelihood strategies. Corruption by middlemen, who were tribals themselves, worsened the situation. Construction of the bridge has also made people's lives difficult in other ways. The region remains submerged under water for a longer time as it is trapped between a guide bund on one side and an embankment on the other. There is less land for grazing cattle. Fishing is also restricted by authorities. The ferry economy which earlier supported about 200 households also collapsed after the bridge got completed. Affected families were not properly rehabilitated.

Many youth from these villages have now moved to towns and cities within and outside the state. Having received a minimal kind of education, they can only hope to get recruited as security guards and night watchmen or become rickshaw drivers. Their wives who are left behind, have the double burden of raising the children and earning for their daily expenses. Some of these women work as daily wage labourers at the construction sites. Due to floods, erosion and loss of land, some of the villagers have travelled to Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary and other forest areas, where again another type of precarity ensues.

Some sections of the Misings have, however, been able to transition upwards into non-traditional sectors, owing to the educational opportunities and jobs that have opened up for

them due to reservation policies. Based on survey research in the districts of Lakhimpur, Golaghat and Jorhat (including Majuli) among Mising households, Morang (2015) estimates that about one-fourth of the population has been able to achieve upward social mobility by moving into traditional/non-traditional domains like salaried jobs, contract work, trade and business, while about half of the population has transitioned laterally into domains like wage-based agricultural/non-agricultural labour work, construction work, carpentry, tailoring, workshop mechanic, selling of fish and rice beer, etc. The remaining one-fourth has stuck to traditional occupations like cultivation, livestock rearing, weaving, etc. A significant and unsurprising conclusion of the study is that proximity to geographical vulnerabilities like floods and erosion greatly determines people's livelihood trajectory and ability to achieve upward social mobility.

The Mising Students

In this section, I give a brief background of the participants in my study.

Participant 1

Binod is pursuing a BA in Economics (6^{th} semester) from a college situated in a village in Majuli. He is from a neighbouring village where he also did his primary schooling. His upper primary and secondary schooling were completed in other villages within Majuli. His father is engaged in agricultural work and has studied till 12^{th}. His mother has never been to school. His older brother has a BA degree, and has opened a vegetable farm. His older sister has completed 12^{th}. His grandparents have never been to school, and were engaged in agriculture. Most of his uncles work as farmers, while one is a high school teacher.

He has a mixed friend group, belonging to Mising and Nepali communities. Along with his studies, he also works on his farm and grows vegetables – potatoes, pumpkins, maize, French beans, peas, and turmeric. He sees them as more profitable than growing rice, which his grandparents prefer. He plans to join hands with a friend who owns a shop and has market networks in Nagaland. His day-to-day chores include taking the cows for grazing, and helping with farm work.

Binod said that most of the information about what he could pursue in education came from his teachers. He mentioned that there was a dearth of information around him due to a lack of education, and teachers were his only window to new possibilities. They were the ones who

suggested he take up Economics. He valued his teachers' advice in most matters. He said he resonated with things that his teachers used to say – about saving money and being self-reliant. And they made things interesting and fun, another reason why he liked listening to them. Most people around him, including his grandparents, wanted him to study so that he could get some government job. "Even a *chowkidar* post is fine," they used to say. But he was annoyed that they had limited their horizons and did not see beyond that. He has his eyes set on his farm. He plans to mechanise the whole system. Right now, they just grow vegetables, eat from their own farm and sell the surplus. But he feels he can work towards making it a sustainable business. For instance, he wants to change how he currently sells turmeric. Instead of selling them raw in the locality, he would like to package them and look for a market outside. That would increase his profits and he might actually also be able to provide employment to one or two more people. Studying Economics, he says, has helped him in this endeavour.

Participant 2

Silpi is pursuing a BA in Sociology (4th semester) from the same college in Majuli as Binod. She belongs to the same village where the college is located. Her entire schooling from primary to secondary was completed there. Her father has studied up to 10th, and owns some agricultural land and livestock. Her mother has done only primary schooling. Her older brother has an MA degree and is a TET (Teacher Eligibility Test) qualified teacher. She has two older sisters – one of them is currently pursuing a BA, and the other has just completed 12th. They are both married. Her grandparents were engaged in agriculture. She has an uncle who works in government service in the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh.

When asked to talk about her friends, all the names she took were Mising names. One of them is studying to be a nurse. She also remembers some of the boys she went to school with, who have now stopped studying. Some of them are working in Chennai and Bangalore as security guards. She sometimes helps her family with farm related work, and sometimes gives tuitions to children in her spare time.

Silpi said she wanted to study Education but the college near her home did not offer this course. Her family did not have enough money to send her to a college that's not nearby. So, she made a compromise with Sociology. She said she did not think much about her future, but she wanted to become a *mastor* (teacher). She had been nursing this dream since childhood.

When she expressed this desire, her parents too were encouraging. She chose arts in her 11th and 12th because there were no science colleges near her home.

Participant 3

Madhav is pursuing a BA in History (4th semester) from a college in North Lakhimpur, a town in Assam. He belongs to a flood-prone village about 60 km away, where he also did his primary schooling. His upper primary and secondary schooling were completed in another nearby village. His father has studied up to 6th grade, and is engaged in agricultural work. His mother has studied till 10th. Nobody in his family from among his father's generation has studied beyond 10th. His grandparents were engaged in agriculture. Some uncles own small shops, and an aunt works in an Anganwadi.

He has a friend who is studying engineering at NEHU (North-Eastern Hill University), Shillong. He says he has lost touch with many of his childhood friends because they have moved due to erosion. When he goes back home, his chores include tending to the garden, ploughing the fields, and tutoring children during summer vacations.

Madhav says he has always been interested in history. There was pressure from his parents to study science in 11th and 12th. He relented and did not resist much because he too was unsure, and did not feel capable of taking his own decisions. It was in 12th that he started realising he was more interested in the arts (social science and humanities) – political science and history. He says he understands that studying science has its perks. Maybe people who take up science will get better job opportunities. Despite that, he wants to follow his interest. He does not believe that jobs are everything. He says that when so many people in this country are doing agricultural work, how can jobs be the only aspirational thing. He sees people moving away from agriculture after getting an education, or after getting a BA or MA degree, and looking for company jobs. He says he is not like them. He wants to return to agriculture and engage in social work. He says that farming does not just mean paddy cultivation. There are many more avenues open to the farmer today. He is also involved with Mising student organisations that work with the community. He feels that it is a platform he can use to give some direction to his community.

He remembers being a good student and liked by his teachers. He was particularly good at math and science. He loved history too but did not see it as a serious subject. It was just

something he liked. There was a group of students he hung out with during school – they were the bright kids, who used to get first division. His parents were also close to their parents. Since they all took up science after 10th, his parents too peer-pressured him into studying science. He did choose science as per their wishes but gradually lost interest and also felt that he was not keeping up. Other things came up – student activities, elections, organising events, etc. Those took up his time and his studies got sidelined. He is however happy with what he is studying now. The discipline of history aligns well with his ambitions of working for the community. He even plans to study further.

Participant 4

Nancy is pursuing a BA in English honours (4th semester) from a college in Dibrugarh, a city in Assam. She is from Gogamukh, a town in Dhemaji district. She did her schooling in Gogamukh, and higher secondary in North Lakhimpur. Her father has completed up to 12th, and is involved in agricultural and contract work. Her mother has a BA degree and works as an office clerk. Her older brother is currently pursuing a BSc in Zoology but simultaneously also preparing for medical entrance tests. Her grandfather was a teacher. Her uncles are involved in agricultural work, contract work, and politics, respectively; one works as an auto driver and another is an audit officer.

Almost all her friends are Mising. One is a Nepali. She says she spends a significant part of her time doing household chores, because her mother is working. She is also planning to do a part-time job along with her studies.

Nancy remembers a teacher in school who made learning English fun for everyone. She said she felt encouraged to express herself in these classes. She hated math and science. Her mother and older brother actually wanted her to take up science. Her brother even said that he could guide her, since he himself was a science student. For her though, it was completely out of the question. So, after 10th, she chose arts. She says she enjoys watching people talk in English. When she decided to choose English honours for her higher education, her parents were supportive. Her mother even said that it had “scope.” She was, however, at some point, a little apprehensive because she had studied in an Assamese medium school and she saw her senior roommate who was doing an English major, struggling and ranting about how tough it was. She was also contemplating taking political science. She laughed and said that when she was younger, she used to tell people she wants to become a politician. She would get respect

and power and not be like these other politicians who are corrupt. There was too much confusion, she said, about whether she should take up English or political science. But an aunt of hers was a lecturer in her current college. She had mentioned that the English department was good. So, that gave her a little confidence. Now, she wants to prepare for competitive exams. Although her mother wants her to study more, and maybe pursue an MA, she feels her marks will not suffice. She feels she should somehow get a job because she sees her family financially struggling a little. They invested a lot on her older brother's education and NEET coaching. He did not make it the first time, and will appear again. Meanwhile, she feels she has to support the family.

Participant 5

Ripun is pursuing a BSc in Zoology (4th semester) from a college under Delhi University. He comes from a village in Lakhimpur district but shifted to a small town very early in his life. He did his primary schooling in an Assamese medium school and moved to an English medium convent school for the rest of his school years. He completed his higher secondary in a college in Guwahati. His mother is a teacher and has an MA degree in History. His father, who has an MA in Political Science, is a lecturer at the local college and also owns a hardware shop. His younger brother is in 11th. His grandfather was a farmer. As for his uncles, one is a politician, another involved in contract work, two of them work as lecturers at the District Institute of Education and Training (DIET), and the last one works at the Directorate of Elementary Education. An aunt of his has a handloom business.

He has friends from various communities (mostly non-tribal) both within and outside Assam, currently pursuing their higher studies in courses like engineering, medicine, and science.

Ripun actually wanted to become a doctor. He had prepared for the medical entrance tests but couldn't make it. Zoology then was the next best thing he could pursue. A distant uncle of his was a doctor. A doctor in those days, within his extended family, was rare to see. He felt very inspired by him. He says he feels lucky to have studied under some good biology teachers. After 10th, his father asked him gently to also consider commerce. But he was sure he wanted to do medical. So, he chose science and everybody was okay with it. Even if he couldn't become a doctor, he says he is academically interested in this field. He is thinking of studying further – an MSc or an MSc–PhD integrated course in a reputed university or institute like Delhi University or IISc (Indian Institute of Science), Bangalore. He is even looking at

universities outside India and will attempt to clear the GRE (Graduate Record Examination). He said that he has kept UPSC as his last option if nothing else works out.

Participant 6

Tulika is pursuing a BA in English honours (6th semester) from a college under Delhi University. She is from Bokakhat, a town in the Golaghat district of Assam. She completed her schooling from a high-fee private school near her place. Her father is a magistrate and has an MPhil degree. Her mother is a professor at a local college and has a PhD in Sociology. Her younger brother is in 11th. Her grandparents were engaged in agricultural work. They had studied upto 10th/12th. One grandfather was a teacher. Among her aunts, one is engaged in agriculture, and another works in an NGO. An uncle of hers is an engineer.

Her friends belong to various communities. They are currently pursuing engineering, medicine, sociology, journalism, English honours, and political science from various cities outside and within Assam. She spends her free time volunteering at NGOs and sometimes teaches underprivileged children in her father's village.

Tulika has always enjoyed reading since childhood. She wants to become a writer and maybe pursue a Master's later. She always knew she wanted to take the humanities/ arts/ social science route. She says she was weak in math. After 10th, there was some confusion regarding what combination of subjects to take. The choices she had in front of her were – political science, sociology, psychology, and home science. She ended up taking sociology and home science.

Academic Journeys in India – Through the Lens of Tribal Students

Negotiating Tension Between the Old and the New

What emerged in students' narratives is that they have to grapple with a changed worldview brought about by schooling, leading to tension within the community and between successive generations. When Binod envisioned shifts in how he runs the farm – from a primarily subsistence to a more profit-driven and mechanised production, by investing in machines, adopting new technologies, and modifying crop choices, it led to fights with his grandparents and other family members who preferred to use ploughs and were more ritualistic in their relationship with land. Their "unscientific" attitude and aversion to technology bothered him. He also did not like the traditional way of rearing poultry and hogs, which are kept under the

changs (traditional stilt houses), in close proximity to humans. He says he has seen how traditional festivities and rituals like *dodgang* and *urom apin* affect the poor and their relationship with money. He feels angered by the fact that they are more interested in celebrating these costly rituals, for which they must buy pigs for the community feasts, than saving some money for their children's education. He also made a point about the "noisiness" of villages – how sound seeps through the *ber* (traditional bamboo walls) and one can hear what kind of commotion goes on in someone else's house. The situation gets worse when *apong* (traditional rice beer) is involved. People tend to talk louder when they are in an inebriated state, he adds. Madhav too has talked about how villages are teeming with people. He feels that the village atmosphere is not conducive for studying. People are always visiting each other's houses. Towns, he feels, are a little better in this regard. This same attitude might have also caused Ripun's family to migrate to the town. In light of this new value system that revolves around formal education, there is a revision and reinterpretation of what traditional systems are doing to people – community feasts, and camaraderie are now seen as "wastage" and as leading to debts in poorer families. The village or the collective is now constructed as a barrier to educational success, which is an individual endeavour. The "modern" or the "scientific" becomes a stick with which to beat the "traditional." Juxtaposing it with the ethos of a caste society, animal rearing, which the Misings have been doing for generations, now becomes a hygiene issue, a safety hazard.

Education as Escape and as Responsibility

Education can also be visualised as a sort of lottery for communities living in precarity. It is a person's one chance at success. For a community that is dependent on agriculture but has to continually deal with natural calamities, floods, erosion and land loss, made even worse by developmental activities, education seems like a way out of such woes, even if not everyone can avail it. So those who have the means, move out of their villages to more urbanised areas in search of better education. We have seen it in the participants' histories. But they do have memories of what they left behind. This is why we see Tulika despite being brought up in relative privilege, going back to her father's village to teach underprivileged children. This is why we see Madhav so passionately talk about *samaj sewa* (community service) and the responsibility of the Mising Autonomous Council to create economically viable options for the people. They are very conscious of the fact that others were not so lucky. It comes up in discussions on reservations too. They mention how they are maybe a small minority who managed to make it. Others who were left behind – the ones who had stopped studying and

moved to metro cities for unskilled and semi-skilled jobs are found to be still struggling. Villages have nothing to offer – only uncertainty amidst mounting economic and developmental pressures. Reservations according to them are then the only thing that might be able to provide some relief. Looking at a small minority of STs who seem to be doing well doesn't mean reservations should be now removed. Because of this consciousness of the condition of their fellow brethren, they also feel a sense of responsibility – they got the chance, so they should not squander it away. They should make the most of it.

Being Different

Educational journeys are also myth-shattering journeys – the cultivated myth of a unified Indian or Assamese society. As students experience more mixed spaces, the further away they go for their studies, they develop an awareness of how they are different from others. It starts with language. Since their language has no use in schools, they start feeling that it is actually an impediment to learning official languages like Assamese. Knowing how to speak Assamese and not "sound like a Mising" while speaking it becomes a metric of one's competence. Madhav talked about his experience of moving to an upper primary school, where he experienced a little shame for not being able to speak Assamese "correctly." There is also an abrupt encounter with the ethos of a competitive and caste society, which results in the construction of the self and one's community as "simple" and "vulnerable." When Nancy spoke about academic life at her college, she described how nobody shared notes, and how they were all so competitive and clever. She feels that "we Misings are too simple and can be easily taken advantage of." Such feelings are exacerbated by the cold and impersonal nature of higher education institutions with their large classroom sizes. Silpi and Ripun contrasted this feeling of being lost in such spaces with their school life where teachers used to take personal interest in their well-being. They also had to routinely contend with the reservation question. They were looked at with disdain because "they had it easy, and made it without studying or hard work." They had to justify that they deserved to be there. Moreover, they had to face hostilities if they did well, or win student elections. Such incidents were a reminder of their being different from the norm – the ones who didn't speak the dominant language, the ones who didn't deserve a seat, the ones who can't cope.

The Shaping of Aspirations and Choices

Dreams and aspirations are shaped early in life. Who people admire early in their lives leaves a lasting impact on what kind of a person they want to become. While the pressure to earn

and get a job does begin to matter at some stage, the choice of subjects is not purely instrumental. Interests matter. Memories of good school teachers and how they taught a particular subject came up repeatedly as a major factor influencing participants' choices of subjects and streams. But there is also a limited exposure to people one can emulate. Aspirations are both shaped by and constrained by what ones sees around oneself. Binod had looked up to teachers in his school who "dressed smartly, and came to school in cars." Silpi always wanted to be a *mastor* (teacher) because those are the ones she must have seen commanding respect when she was a child. Nancy wanted to be a politician – that would give her respect and power, she claimed. Ripun, early in his life, came across a distant relative who was a doctor and he wanted to become like him. Choices are also shaped by purpose. Madhav chose to "leave" science because he was more interested in serving the community. Gender added another dimension to educational choices. Silpi had to be satisfied with a course that was available in the college near her home. Also, while Nancy's older brother got additional time for multiple NEET attempts, she had to think about looking for a job to support the family.

Finally, something also has to be said about the role of identity-based student organisations in participants' lives. Each participant mentioned in this paper was in some way or the other involved with a Mising student organisation. Some were more actively involved than others. They participated in student elections, organised freshers' events, and discussed politics through such platforms. Others were not so directly involved but they received help in times of need, especially those who had to move far away from home and adjust to a new city to study. It is such organisations that eased their transition.

Conclusion

Being an educated tribal therefore means having to negotiate with changing value systems that an education system ushers in, living with tension between the old and the new, between the tribal and the non-tribal, between the collective and the individual. These, however, have psychological costs. There are conflicts with one's own community and inferiorisation of community identity, which Bodhi (2024) calls part of the adaptation or assimilation process. Being an educated tribal means education was that one chance at escaping economic uncertainties, but also carrying the burden of being the privileged one, of losing touch with friends who had it worse, or who could never be seen again because natural disasters and developmental activities pushed them away from their villages, and who left studies to work

as daily wage workers in distant cities. Being an educated tribal means having to confront one's social identity – dealing with an awareness of difference in language, ethos and culture – either fighting inferiorisation or internalising inferiority. It means having to continuously justify one's place in higher education, to fight notions that being an "ST" does not mean one has been handed things on a platter. Being an educated tribal also means educational aspirations were being shaped or constrained by the limited presence of role models in one's vicinity or family networks.

Bodhi's (2024) adaptation-negotiation-freedom framework to understand state-tribe relationships is also useful to look at tribal students' academic journeys in educational institutions. "Adaptation" or what is popularly known as "assimilation" is characterised by the gradual replacement of one's language with the dominant regional language in public spaces, an inferiorisation of community identity, and experience of powerlessness. With an absence of one's own language to make sense of reality, what we see then is epistemological disintegration. One is forced to look at the social world through a lens handed over by the hegemon. A little away from this, where there's some space for dialogue, lies "negotiation," or what in popular parlance is called "integration." This space is characterised by assertion of community identity, resistance to agenda set by dominant groups, a deliberate usage of one's language to keep it alive, and search for distinct scripts. Emerging identity-based student organisations seem to aid such processes. Such collectives are where students start voicing their experiences in a reflexive, deliberative mode and therefore hope to recover their sense of self. Towards the end, there is "freedom," which is interpreted as "isolation" in the isolation-integration-assimilation paradigm. Freedom is a state of total epistemological stability and is characterised by social cohesiveness as a community, which is experiencing a forward movement in its own organic social evolutionary process.

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