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LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF VILLAGE COMMITTEES IN TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT IN TRIPURA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of Village Committees (VCs) in the educational development of Tripura's tribal communities. In Tripura's autonomous tribal areas (TTAADC), grassroots governance is exercised through elected Village Committees (akin to gram panchayats). As of 1994 TTAADC Village Committee Act, the functions of the committees have been explicitly related to education. This statutory role gives the committees a mandate to support local schools. This study reviewed government schemes, NGO initiatives, and data on school enrollment, dropout and infrastructure. The findings of this study reveal that while Tripura has achieved very high literacy rate on the state level, significant gaps remain at the secondary educational level among tribal youth; strengthening VCs' involvement through training and better resources is vital for dropout prevention and culturally relevant education.

KEY WORDS: *Village Committees, Tribal Education, TTAADC, Community Participation, Educational Development*

INTRODUCTION

Tripura is one of India's states with a considerable tribal population, with Scheduled Tribes constituting almost one-third of its population. Historically, tribal communities in Tripura had limited access to formal schooling. In the pre-independence period and princely state era, Geography and neglect made it hard for tribal people to get an education; formal modern education didn't start in Tripura until the late 1800s and early 1900s. The formation of TTAADC under the Sixth Schedule in 1982 after the merger with India, efforts were made to improve tribal education. The state governments established many remote schools in tribal areas. However, many of these remote schools have suffered from low enrollment rate and poor infrastructure. Despite Tripura's overall literacy rate of approximately 94.7% among the highest in India, about 147 government schools across the state had fewer than 10 students, and 13 had zero enrolment as of 2019 (Deb, 2019). In tribal areas, school closures have occurred due to these enrolment crises. These challenges make the community involvement in education very important.

In this context, Village Committees (VCs) a self-governing local body in TTAADC areas play an important role. VCs are equivalent to Gram Panchayats in non-ADC areas, the TTAADC administers more than 500 such committees at the village level in ADC area. Under the 1994 TTAADC Village Committee Act, VCs are responsible for local development including roads, sanitation, welfare and specifically with "maintenance of children, adult and women education" (Government of Tripura, 1994). In practice, many schools in tribal villages rely upon community leadership; the law empowers VCs to undertake small development schemes which includes minor school works. Moreover, formal School Management Committees (SMCs) or Village Education Committees, under the national Right to Education Act and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), are required at each school with at least 75% parents and representation of weaker sections, putting grassroots involvement into school governance (Government of Tripura, 2011).

This study shows how village committees in Tripura impacts primary and secondary education in Tripura's tribal areas today. The study takes into account the official policies, academic literature and NGO reports to analyze the village committees' contributions in tribal education, outlining its implications for policy; how strengthening VCs and aligning them with education programs can improve outcomes for tribal students in Tripura.

Historical Background

Education in tribal areas of Tripura has significantly developed over the past few decades. During the British colonial rule and princely rule (pre-1949), tribals of the state had almost no access to formal schooling. After the 1949 merger, the Manikya rulers attempted educational reforms, but progress was slow. In independent India, literacy remained low among tribals. According to a study conducted in the middle of the 20th century, the literacy rate for Scheduled Tribes (ST) in Tripura was about 40%, while the overall literacy rate was 60% (Singh, 1965). With statehood in 1972 and especially after the creation of TTAADC in 1982, tribal education gained institutional support under the Sixth Schedule. The Tripura Janasiksha Andolan (People's Education Movement) in the 1960s and 1970s, led by tribal leaders such as Dasaratha Debbarma, encouraged tribal communities for schooling. Between 2003 and 2009, for example,

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over 600 new primary schools were opened in ADC areas under SSA and existing schools were upgraded. By 2009, TTAADC administers 1,622 primary schools and one English-medium residential high school.

Tribal welfare policies also lead to establishment of residential institutions in the state, since 1997, the Tripura Tribal Welfare Residential Educational Institutions Society (TTWREIS) has run Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) and Ashram schools for tribal children (Government of Tripura, Tribal Welfare Department, 1997). Meanwhile, curriculum reforms introduced the Kokborok language in many tribal-area schools, currently taught in over 1,200 schools, reflecting growing cultural inclusion (Deb, 2019)

Despite these expansions, qualitative issues persisted. Tribal families in hilly regions often sent children to work, and dropouts at the upper-primary/secondary level remained high. Literacy gains have largely been concentrated at the primary level; secondary enrollment lags, especially for tribal girls. By 2011, tribal literacy trailed state averages, and tribal dropout rates were of concern. A 2019 state report noted secondary dropout in TTAADC still above 10% (down from 27% in 2017). Chief Minister Manik Saha acknowledged "uneven distribution of teachers, infrastructure deficits and rural connectivity" in tribal areas and announced new funds for school repairs and teacher hiring (Press Trust of India, 2024)

Village Committees: Structure and Mandate

Under the TTAADC Act of 1994, Village Committees were formally established as the basic unit of governance in tribal areas (Government of Tripura, 1994). Each Committee is elected by residents of a tribal village, with statutory reservations for women. VCs exercise "all or any" delegated development functions, subject to Executive Council rules. Key functions include sanitation, water, roads, and notably clause (k): the "maintenance of children, adult and women education". In effect, the law explicitly charges VCs with promoting education at all levels (Government of Tripura, 1994).

In practice, VCs act as the executive agency for minor development projects in their villages, including construction and repair of buildings and community centers. This role often extends to school infrastructure. For example, VCs can sponsor school repairs, new toilets, or kitchens, often utilizing centrally funded schemes such as MGNREGA or district grants. The Tribal Welfare and Education departments frequently require community matching or maintenance, making VC involvement essential (Government of Tripura, 1994)

Besides VCs, Tripura has instituted formal education committees at higher levels. Notably, TTAADC formed Inspectorate-Level Education Committees (23 in number, one per inspectorate) comprising community representatives. These committees serve as monitoring boards, ensuring the proper functioning of schools under their jurisdiction by checking working days, class conduction, student and teacher attendance, exam conduction, and Mid-Day Meal implementation. This reflects the official stance that "community participation is a must" for schemes like SSA and MDM.

At the village-school level, School Management Committees (SMCs) provide another grassroots forum. Under Tripura's RTE Rules (2011), each government school must have an SMC of 12–24 members, with 75% parents/guardians, including representation of disadvantaged communities (Government of Tripura, 2011). While not unique to tribal areas, many tribal parents often VC members themselves serve on these committees, linking village leadership to school management. Older SSA guidelines referred to Village Education Committees (VECs) in a similar spirit; today SMCs subsume that role. In effect, Tripura's tribal villages have multiple overlapping community bodies focusing on education: VCs for overall development, education committees for scheme oversight, and SMCs for individual schools.

Village Committees and Educational Infrastructure

Village Committees in Tripura play a direct role in addressing school infrastructure deficits. In many tribal villages, VCs sponsor or facilitate the construction and repair of primary school buildings, toilets, boundary walls, and kitchen sheds for the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) program. Such works are often implemented through small grants or schemes like MGNREGA. For instance, the TTAADC budget allocates funds for "minor works" to be implemented by Village Committees, and education-related infrastructure often falls under this category (Government of Tripura, 1994).

Infrastructure problems are acute in remote tribal schools. A 2019 report noted that 13 schools in Tripura had no enrollment and 147 had fewer than 10 students, with many situated in ADC areas (Deb, 2019). In some cases, the lack of proper classrooms, teacher quarters, or toilets has discouraged enrollment, particularly for girls. VCs step in by mobilizing labor, ensuring land availability, or lobbying for government support. For example, in several ADC villages, the Committee has arranged bamboo fencing for schools or contributed locally raised funds for building repairs.

Through their development mandate, VCs thus complement the Education Department's construction of school buildings. The Mid-Day Meal program, for example, requires kitchen sheds in every school, and in Tripura's tribal areas, many were constructed with VC involvement. Although funds are disbursed centrally, village leadership ensures timely construction, supervises quality, and arranges maintenance.

Village Committees and Community Participation

VCs also promote parental and community participation in education. Educational development is not just about buildings but also about motivating parents to send their children to school. In tribal societies where child labor and domestic work often compete with schooling, local leaders' persuasion is critical.

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Village Committees and School Management Committees are the forums through which parents' meetings are convened. As per SSA norms, each SMC prepares a School Development Plan, monitors teacher attendance, and ensures community ownership. In Tripura's tribal villages, these committees are often composed of VC members, women representatives, and tribal elders. By participating, parents gain a sense of responsibility for the school's functioning.

Community involvement has tangible impacts. When VCs take initiative, student attendance improves. For instance, in a village under Gandacharra subdivision, the VC, together with the school committee, imposed informal sanctions on parents not sending children regularly, leading to improved attendance. Similarly, NGOs working in West and North Tripura districts have partnered with VCs to run awareness campaigns, emphasizing the benefits of schooling and discouraging early marriage of girls.

Monitoring Dropouts

Dropout remains a persistent challenge in tribal education, especially beyond the primary stage. Economic hardship, distance to secondary schools, and cultural barriers contribute to dropout, particularly among girls. The role of VCs here is critical. Committees engage in counseling parents, encouraging them to keep children enrolled. In some instances, VCs organize escort arrangements for children traveling long distances to secondary schools. With the introduction of bicycles for girl students by the state government, VCs facilitated distribution and encouraged usage (Deb, 2019).

Residential schools, such as EMRS and Ashram schools, have been crucial in dropout reduction, but not all children can access them. In village schools, the VC's encouragement and oversight are vital. Dropout reduction is also linked to child labor. VCs, in coordination with NGOs, intervene when children are withdrawn for jhum (shifting cultivation) or wage labor. Awareness campaigns led by Village Committees emphasize the long-term benefits of education and dissuade such practices.

Despite these efforts, dropout remains high at the secondary stage. As of 2024 the secondary dropout rate in TTAADC areas, while improved, remained above 10% (Press Trust of India, 2024). This suggests that while VCs contribute positively, systemic factors like lack of adequate teachers and infrastructure limit their impact.

Cultural Inclusion and Language

Village Committees in Tripura's tribal areas contribute to making education culturally inclusive. For tribal communities, education has historically been viewed as alien to their culture, conducted in non-native languages and ignoring traditional practices. To overcome this barrier, community institutions play a mediating role. In recent decades, Tripura has integrated Kokborok (the largest tribal language) into the curriculum, now taught in more than 1,200 schools. This inclusion has been strongly supported by tribal leaders and community committees, which petitioned the state government to expand Kokborok medium instruction. Village Committees frequently assist schools in hiring local resource persons or motivating educated youth to teach Kokborok in early grades (Deb, 2019).

Traditional culture is also promoted through community participation in school activities. Village Committees and SMCs often encourage observance of tribal festivals in schools, integration of folk dance and songs into extracurricular activities, and use of local history in teaching. By aligning education with cultural identity, these efforts enhance acceptance of schooling. Studies indicate that tribal children's retention improves when schools respect local language and traditions. Another example of cultural responsiveness is found in residential schools. EMRS and Ashram schools run by TTWREIS emphasize tribal heritage alongside mainstream curricula. Village Committees often lobby for more such schools in remote ADC villages, recognizing their role in preserving identity while delivering modern education (Government of Tripura, Tribal Welfare Department, 1997).

Policy Implementation and Schemes

Village Committees are the frontline agents for implementing education-related policies. In tribal areas, state and central schemes such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA), Right to Education Act (2009), Mid-Day Meal (MDM), and scholarships reach communities largely through VC mediation. For SSA, SMCs (often overlapping with VCs) prepare annual School Development Plans, monitor utilization of grants, and ensure community contribution in kind or labor. For RMSA, VCs assist in identifying land for new secondary schools, mobilizing parental demand, and ensuring girls' enrollment. Under the RTE Act, VCs and SMCs ensure free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14 and address grievances (Government of Tripura, 2011).

The Mid-Day Meal scheme, introduced in 2003 in Tripura, relies heavily on village-level monitoring to ensure that food is cooked daily and distributed fairly. Without VC involvement, implementation would falter in remote areas. Similarly, in implementing the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme for girls' residential schools, VCs play a role in mobilizing girl students and convincing parents to enroll them. Scholarship distribution and hostel schemes for ST students also require verification by local bodies. VCs often certify eligible students and help families navigate paperwork. Such localized facilitation ensures that welfare schemes reach the intended beneficiaries.

In recent years, the state government has emphasized digital learning. Distribution of tablets and smart classrooms has been extended to some tribal areas. VCs contribute by arranging safe spaces, monitoring usage, and encouraging teachers to adopt technology. However, digital divides remain a barrier, and Village Committees often lobby for better connectivity.

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ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that Village Committees in Tripura's tribal areas are not peripheral but central to the delivery of education. Their contributions extend across multiple dimensions of the educational process. First, they play a crucial role in infrastructure facilitation by ensuring that school buildings, toilets, kitchens for the Mid-Day Meal programme, and hostels are constructed, repaired, and properly maintained. Second, they engage in community mobilization by persuading parents to enroll and retain their children in school, organizing awareness campaigns, and fostering trust between families and educational institutions. Third, Village Committees contribute to monitoring and accountability by overseeing teacher attendance, supervising the implementation of the Mid-Day Meal scheme, and ensuring the smooth conduct of examinations and school activities. Finally, they act as agents of cultural mediation by promoting the inclusion of tribal languages, festivals, and traditions within school practices, thereby reducing cultural alienation and making education more contextually relevant and acceptable to tribal communities.

While the statutory framework (Government of Tripura, 1994; Government of Tripura, 2011) gives them authority, actual performance varies across villages. Strong committees with active leaders often show better educational outcomes; weak or inactive committees have little impact. Moreover, systemic constraints lack of adequate teachers, high student teacher ratios, and uneven connectivity limit what local committees can achieve.

Tripura presents a paradox. On one hand, it boasts one of India's highest literacy rates, with near-universal enrollment at the primary level. On the other hand, secondary dropout rates remain high in tribal areas, and the quality of schooling is inconsistent. The persistence of small, under-enrolled schools highlights the demographic and geographic challenges of hill villages. In this context, Village Committees represent a form of decentralized governance that brings accountability closer to the people. Unlike distant bureaucracies, they know the local context and can respond flexibly. The statutory mandate of VCs (Government of Tripura, 1994) empowers them to address education directly, while SMCs created under the RTE Act provide a parallel structure for school-level engagement. Together, these committees embody the principle of community participation in education (Government of Tripura, 2011).

Their strength lies in cultural legitimacy. Tribal parents may distrust distant officials but respect local leaders, especially when they communicate in Kokborok or other tribal languages. By endorsing modern schooling while respecting traditional culture, VCs reduce resistance and promote acceptance. This is particularly evident in efforts to expand Kokborok-medium education, where community advocacy has been decisive (Deb, 2019).

However, there are limitations. Committees often lack resources and training. While they can supervise infrastructure projects, technical quality depends on engineers and funds. Monitoring teacher attendance may raise awareness but cannot compensate for systemic shortages. Dropout prevention requires not only persuasion but also structural supports hostels, transport, and scholarships. Thus, Village Committees are necessary but not sufficient. They need support from state institutions and NGOs to achieve lasting impact.

CONCLUSION

Tripura's experience suggests that Village Committees can significantly advance educational development in tribal areas, provided they receive adequate support. Since 2010, concerted government action (SSA/RMSA funding, tribal welfare projects) and NGO initiatives have improved basic infrastructure and reduced dropouts in TTAADC. Village Committees have been integral partners; they physically build and maintain schools, they foster community ownership, and they hold schools accountable. The statutory recognition of their educational mandate means that VCs can serve as local champions of learning.

To sustain and enhance these gains, the state should further invest in VC capacity building. This includes training VC members on RTE provisions and school management, giving them small discretionary education funds, and formally integrating them into block and district-level education planning. Special attention is needed for secondary education with only 55% of tribal villages having a high school nearby.

In conclusion, Village Committees (and allied grassroots committees) are a cornerstone of tribal education in Tripura. By linking policy to people, they help translate laws and schemes into tangible learning. The analysis drawing on government acts, official data, and case studies shows that empowering these committees remains critical. Ensuring that every tribal child can attend and benefit from primary/secondary school will depend heavily on leveraging the Village Committee as the village's own education advocate.

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