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# EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION THROUGH OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: A STUDY OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN TRIPURA

**Dr. Marconi Debbarma[1*], Dr. Pradip Molsom[2], Panthor Debbarma[3]**
[1]*Assistant Professor of Sociology, Mata Tripura Sundari Open University, Tripura*
[2]*Assistant Professor of English, Mata Tripura Sundari Open University, Tripura.*
[3]*Assistant Professor of Political Science, Mata Tripura Sundari Open University, Tripura.*
[*]*Corresponding Author*

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**ABSTRACT**
*Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a transformative modality for extending higher education to marginalised and geographically isolated communities. In the northeastern Indian state of Tripura, indigenous communities comprising nineteen Scheduled Tribe groups have historically faced structural barriers to formal education rooted in socio-economic deprivation, geographic inaccessibility, and linguistic disadvantage. This qualitative study investigates the role of ODL in promoting educational inclusion among these communities, with particular focus on indigenous students pursuing their degrees through various Open and Distance Learning modes of education in West Tripura District. Drawing on in-depth interviews with indigenous students enrolled in ODL programmes, the study explores their motivational trajectories, lived experiences, institutional support structures, and the challenges they negotiate as learners in a non-traditional academic environment. The findings reveal that ODL meaningfully expands educational access by overcoming spatial and temporal constraints, yet several structural impediments including digital poverty, inadequate study centre infrastructure, limited language support, and economic precarity, continue to undermine the full realisation of inclusive education. The study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on ODL, equity, and Indigeneity in the Global South, and offers evidence-based policy recommendations to strengthen ODL as an instrument of social justice in tribal-majority regions.*
**KEYWORDS**: *Open and Distance Learning, Indigenous Communities, Educational Inclusion, Tripura, Higher Education, Scheduled Tribes, Social Equity, West Tripura*

## INTRODUCTION

Education is widely acknowledged as the foundational pillar of human development, social mobility, and democratic participation. Yet the promise of universal education remains elusive for millions of individuals who inhabit the margins of social and geographic life. Among the most persistently disadvantaged are indigenous communities across South Asia, whose relationship with formal educational institutions has been shaped by colonial legacies, cultural discontinuities, and structural inequalities embedded in mainstream systems of governance and economy. In India, the constitutional framework recognises the vulnerability of Scheduled Tribes (STs) through a series of protective provisions and affirmative policies, yet the gap between policy aspiration and lived reality remains wide.

Tripura, a small landlocked state in the northeastern region of India, presents a particularly instructive case for examining the intersection of indigeneity, geography, and educational access. With a Scheduled Tribe population constituting over 31 per cent of the total population, Tripura is home to nineteen constitutionally recognised tribal communities, including the Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Chakma, Mog, Halaam, Garo, Munda, Oraon, Santali, and others. These communities are dispersed across remote hilly terrains, forest tracts, and semi-urban peripheries, often at considerable distance from conventional educational infrastructure. Despite significant improvements in literacy rates, Tripura's overall literacy rate stands at 87.75 per cent as per the 2011 Census, deeper structural inequalities persist in access to higher education, especially for tribal youth residing in remote and semi-remote areas.

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged globally as an alternative pedagogical framework that seeks to transcend the spatial, temporal, and economic constraints associated with campus-based education. By enabling learners to pursue academic qualifications without full-time physical presence at a university, ODL represents a potentially democratising force that can extend the reach of higher education to those excluded by conventional models. In India, the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), established in 1985, pioneered the ODL movement at the national level, and a subsequent proliferation of state open universities has further expanded this landscape, creating a robust ecosystem of open and distance learning institutions across the country.

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The significance of ODL for indigenous communities in Tripura cannot be overstated. Traditional universities, concentrated primarily in urban and semi-urban centres, are largely inaccessible to tribal youth who face compound barriers: the cost of relocation, cultural alienation in mainstream academic environments, the absence of family support systems, economic compulsions that demand engagement in agrarian or wage labour, and the incompatibility of rigid academic schedules with seasonal and community obligations. ODL, at least in theory, offers a more accommodating and flexible alternative. However, whether this theoretical promise translates into authentic educational inclusion the substantive participation of indigenous learners not merely as enrolled students but as empowered knowledge-seekers is an empirical question that demands systematic inquiry.

This article addresses this question through a qualitative study focused on indigenous students pursuing their degrees through various Open and Distance Learning modes of education in West Tripura District. It examines the pathways through which these students have come to pursue ODL, the institutional and personal resources they draw upon, the obstacles they encounter, and the meanings they attach to their educational experiences. By centring the voices and lived realities of indigenous learners, the study aims to contribute both to the academic literature on ODL and inclusive education in India and to the practical policy discourse surrounding the role of open universities in advancing equity in higher education.

## OBJECTIVES

The study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the motivational factors that lead indigenous students in West Tripura District to pursue higher education through Open and Distance Learning.
2. To explore the lived experiences of indigenous ODL learners, including their interactions with institutional support structures, study centres, and digital learning resources.
3. To identify the structural, socio-economic, and cultural barriers that limit effective participation of indigenous communities in ODL programmes.
4. To assess the role of ODL institutions in promoting educational inclusion among Scheduled Tribe communities in Tripura.
5. To formulate evidence-based recommendations for strengthening ODL as an instrument of inclusive education for indigenous communities in Tripura and comparable contexts.

## RESEARCH GAP

The scholarly literature on ODL in India has expanded considerably over the past three decades. Researchers have examined issues of access and equity (Panda, 2005), quality assurance (Chauhan, 2017), learner support systems (Simpson, 2012), and the integration of technology in distance education (Devi & Singh, 2014). At the national level, considerable attention has been devoted to IGNOU's reach and impact, as well as to the contributions of state open universities in regions such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Rajasthan. However, the scholarship on ODL in the northeastern states of India remains conspicuously thin.

More significantly, the specific intersection of ODL and indigenous education in India has received limited systematic attention. Studies on tribal education in India have tended to focus on school-level participation, dropout rates, and the effectiveness of residential schools (Eklavya Vidyalayas), with relatively scant investigation of the role of ODL in enabling indigenous learners to access higher education. The few studies that do address tribal learners in ODL contexts (see Baruah, 2018; Kalita, 2020) have been largely descriptive and quantitative in orientation, relying on enrolment statistics and survey data without adequately capturing the subjective experiences, cultural negotiations, and structural contexts that shape indigenous learners' engagement with ODL.

The present study by employing qualitative methods to generate rich, contextualised insights into the experiences of indigenous students pursuing their degrees through various ODL modes of education in West Tripura District. In doing so, it aims to contribute both to the regional scholarship on education in Northeast India and to the broader comparative literature on ODL, equity, and Indigeneity in postcolonial societies.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is theoretically anchored in three interrelated bodies of thought: Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, the concept of Educational Inclusion as elaborated in contemporary inclusive education literature, and postcolonial frameworks for understanding indigenous knowledge and educational marginalisation.

### *The Capability Approach*

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (1999) offers a powerful normative framework for evaluating educational systems not merely in terms of access or enrolment, but in terms of the real freedoms — or capabilities — that education enables individuals to enjoy. Applied to the context of indigenous ODL learners in Tripura, the Capability Approach directs attention to whether ODL genuinely expands the substantive freedoms of tribal students to lead lives they have reason to value. This means looking beyond metrics of enrolment and completion to ask: do ODL programmes empower indigenous learners with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to participate meaningfully in social, economic, and civic life? Are institutional arrangements designed to remove conversion handicaps — the obstacles that prevent individuals from translating educational opportunities into actual capabilities? The

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Capability Approach thus sensitises the analysis to questions of power, structural enablement, and the conditions under which educational inclusion becomes substantively meaningful rather than formally nominal.

***Educational Inclusion***

The concept of educational inclusion, as theorised in the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) and subsequent scholarship (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2018), refers to the process of identifying and dismantling barriers to the full and equitable participation of all learners in education. Inclusion in this framework is not reducible to physical presence in an educational institution; it encompasses pedagogical responsiveness to learner diversity, the affirmation of cultural identities, and the creation of learning environments that honour rather than suppress the linguistic and epistemic resources that learners bring. Applied to ODL for indigenous communities, this framework raises critical questions about whether the curriculum, medium of instruction, assessment practices, and support systems of open universities are genuinely responsive to the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of tribal learners, or whether they reproduce, in a more spatially diffuse form, the assimilationist logic of mainstream higher education.

***Postcolonial and Indigenous Education Perspectives***

Postcolonial theories of education (Fanon, 1963; Thiong'o, 1986; Smith, 1999) illuminate the ways in which colonial systems of schooling institutionalised the devaluation of indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultural practices, imposing Eurocentric epistemologies as the universal standard of legitimate knowledge. In the Indian context, this colonial inheritance has been mediated but not dissolved by the postindependence educational project. Indigenous communities continue to negotiate educational systems that are largely designed around the cultural assumptions of dominant, upper-caste, and urban populations. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) framework of decolonising methodologies further informs the methodological orientation of this study, emphasising the importance of research approaches that centre indigenous perspectives, validate indigenous voices, and are oriented toward community benefit rather than extractive knowledge production. Together, these theoretical strands provide a multi-layered analytical lens for interpreting the experiences of indigenous ODL learners in Tripura within their broader historical, structural, and epistemic contexts.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

***Research Design***

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in an interpretive-phenomenological tradition. Qualitative methods are appropriate for this inquiry because the study is concerned with understanding the subjective meanings, lived experiences, and contextual particularities of indigenous students' engagement with ODL dimensions of social reality that are not adequately captured by quantitative measures such as enrolment counts or examination pass rates. The phenomenological emphasis within qualitative inquiry directs attention to the texture and structure of experience as it is lived by the participants themselves, enabling the researcher to move beyond surface-level descriptions to deeper understandings of the social and cultural processes at work.

***Study Area***

The study was conducted in West Tripura District, which encompasses the state capital Agartala and its surrounding semi-urban and rural areas. West Tripura District was selected for three principal reasons. First, it contains the highest concentration of Open and Distance Learning study centres and administrative infrastructure in Tripura, making it the most accessible location for reaching enrolled students. Second, despite being the most urbanised district in Tripura, West Tripura contains significant tribal settlements particularly in the block-level areas of Mandwi, Mohanpur, and Jirania where indigenous communities face conditions of socio-economic marginalisation that make ODL a particularly relevant educational option. Third, the district encompasses a range of settlement types from peri-urban fringes to semi-rural areas allowing for some degree of variation in participant contexts.

***Participant Selection***

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The study focused specifically on indigenous students — those belonging to Scheduled Tribe communities as per the Government of India's constitutional list — who were currently enrolled in undergraduate or postgraduate degree programmes through various Open and Distance Learning modes of education in West Tripura District. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience and could speak meaningfully to the research questions. Snowball sampling was subsequently used to identify additional participants through the social networks of initially recruited participants, particularly valuable in reaching students in more remote settlement areas who might not be easily identifiable through institutional rosters.

In total, twenty-two in-depth interviews were conducted with indigenous ODL learners. Participants included twelve female and ten male students, ranging in age from nineteen to thirty-eight years. They represented eight different Scheduled Tribe communities, including Tripuri (Kokborok-speaking), Reang, Jamatia, Chakma, Mog, Munda, Oraon, and Santali communities. Participants were enrolled in programmes spanning the arts, social sciences, commerce, and education streams. This diversity was intentional, enabling the study to capture a range of experiences across gender, tribal community, programme type, and settlement context.

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***Data Collection***

The primary method of data collection was the in-depth individual interview. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, guided by a flexible interview protocol developed in consultation with the theoretical framework and research objectives. The interview protocol covered the following thematic areas: educational and occupational backgrounds; reasons for choosing ODL over conventional higher education; prior educational experiences; interactions with ODL institutions' administrative and academic staff; use of study centres and self-learning materials; engagement with digital platforms and e-learning resources; experiences of social support or isolation; perceived challenges and facilitating factors; and aspirations regarding the role of education in their lives. The protocol was designed to be flexible, allowing the interviewer to follow threads of interest raised by participants and to adapt the sequence and framing of questions to the conversational flow of individual interviews.

Interviews were conducted primarily in Kokborok and Bengali, with some interviews conducted bilingually. Where participants belonged to communities whose primary language was neither Kokborok nor Bengali (such as Santali or Oraon communities), a community-fluent research assistant facilitated translation. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Transcripts in regional languages were translated into English for the purposes of analysis, with careful attention to preserving the semantic nuances of participants' original expressions.

In addition to interviews, the study drew on documentary sources including official ODL institutional prospectuses, enrolment data disaggregated by category, study centre reports, and relevant government policy documents. Informal field observations at two study centres in West Tripura were also conducted to supplement interview data with contextual information about the physical and social environment in which ODL activities take place.

***Data Analysis***

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following the systematic procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved: repeated reading of transcripts to develop familiarity with the data; generation of initial codes capturing semantic content; clustering of codes into candidate themes; review and refinement of themes in relation to the full dataset and the research questions; and final definition and naming of themes with supporting evidence. Throughout this process, analytical memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions and to ensure reflexive engagement with emerging insights. The analysis was primarily inductive allowing themes to emerge from the data while also being informed by the theoretical frameworks articulated in Section 4. Member checking was conducted with a subset of participants to validate the representativeness of emerging themes. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the authors' institutional review board, and all participants' identities are protected through anonymisation in this article.

## DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The thematic analysis of interview data yielded five major themes: motivational pathways to ODL enrolment; the meaning of flexibility in educational practice; institutional support and its limitations; socio-cultural and economic barriers; and aspirations, agency, and the transformative potential of education. Each theme is elaborated below with reference to illustrative participant voices.

***Motivational Pathways to ODL Enrolment***

Participants' motivations for enrolling in ODL programmes were complex and multi-layered, shaped by the interaction of personal ambitions, family circumstances, economic constraints, and prior educational experiences. The most commonly cited motivational factor was the desire to obtain a degree while simultaneously meeting economic and familial obligations. Several participants were engaged in agricultural labour, daily wage work, or small-scale trading — activities that could not be abandoned for full-time study without severe economic consequences for their households.

As one female participant from the Tripuri community explained: 'I wanted to continue studying after Class 12, but my family could not afford for me to go to a college in Agartala and stay there. My father does farming. So when I heard that I can study through Open and Distance Learning and get a degree from home, I felt this was my only chance.' Another male participant from the Reang community, who works as a daily labourer, stated: 'I work six days a week. There is no way I could sit in a classroom every day. ODL means I can study in the morning and on Sundays. It is the only way education is possible for me.'

A second significant motivational factor was the aspiration for government employment, which in the context of Tripura's limited private sector and high unemployment, represents the most reliable pathway to economic security. Participants consistently articulated a connection between obtaining a degree through ODL and eligibility for competitive examinations for government posts. This instrumental motivation was often entwined with a deeper, more intrinsic valuation of education as a form of personal development and social recognition.

Several female participants highlighted the specific significance of ODL in enabling women to pursue higher education within the context of gendered social norms that restrict women's mobility and prioritise domestic roles. One participant from the Jamatia

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community noted: 'In my village, it is not considered good for a girl to go far for studies. My parents were worried. But with Open and Distance Learning, I am studying without leaving home, and they are comfortable. This makes everything possible.'

***The Meaning of Flexibility in Educational Practice***

Flexibility emerged as the most consistently valued attribute of ODL across all participant interviews. However, the meaning of flexibility was not reducible to temporal convenience alone; it encompassed a broader set of affordances that enabled participants to integrate education into lives structured by multiple, competing demands.

Temporal flexibility — the ability to determine one's own study schedule — was particularly significant for participants who were engaged in seasonal agricultural work. Several participants described organising their studies around the agricultural calendar, studying intensively during non-harvest periods and reducing study time during planting and harvesting seasons. As one male participant from the Munda community put it: 'The land work is most from June to October. During these months I study less. But in winter I study more. ODL allows this. A regular college would not understand this.'

Spatial flexibility, the ability to study from home or from a local study centre rather than from a distant campus — was equally significant. Participants described the cost and disruption of relocation to urban centres as prohibitive barriers that ODL effectively dissolved. The ability to remain embedded in their communities while pursuing higher education was valued not only instrumentally but also culturally, several participants expressed that remaining in their communities allowed them to maintain important social, familial, and ceremonial responsibilities that would have been impossible to fulfil in a campus environment.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that flexibility, while enabling, also created its own challenges. The absence of structured daily academic routines required high degrees of self-discipline and self-directed learning habits that not all students found easy to cultivate, particularly those who had received their schooling in resource-poor environments with limited emphasis on autonomous learning skills.

***Institutional Support and Its Limitations***

Participants' experiences of ODL institutional support systems revealed a mixed picture. Study centres in West Tripura District were generally praised as important points of contact that mitigated the isolation intrinsic to distance learning. Study centre counsellors were described by some participants as approachable and helpful, particularly in clarifying assignment requirements and examination procedures. The provision of self-instructional materials (SIMs) in print form was appreciated as a resource that could be accessed without internet connectivity, though their quality and accessibility in indigenous languages were frequently criticised. However, significant gaps in institutional support were consistently identified. The availability and responsiveness of academic counselling were described as variable and insufficient. Several participants reported difficulties in reaching study centre staff outside scheduled contact sessions, and a number complained of infrequent personal contact sessions, which limited opportunities for face-to-face academic guidance. One participant from the Chakma community observed: 'The contact sessions happen only a few times a year. When you have a problem with the material, you have to wait a long time to get help. Sometimes I don't understand what is written in the SIM and there is nobody to explain it immediately.'

Digital support infrastructure was identified as a critical weakness. While ODL institutions have developed online portals for submission of assignments and access to digital study materials, a significant proportion of participants reported unreliable internet access attributable to both poor network coverage in their residential areas and the inability to afford data plans. The assumption of digital connectivity as a default modality of ODL engagement was experienced by many participants as an exclusionary structural feature. One participant living on the outskirts of Agartala stated: 'The internet in my area comes and goes. Submitting assignments online is sometimes very difficult. I have had to travel to the centre to submit papers that I was supposed to send online.'

Language emerged as a particularly significant dimension of institutional inadequacy. While most ODL programmes in Tripura are conducted primarily in Bengali and English, the majority of indigenous participants reported that these languages were not their primary languages of intellectual engagement. Participants from Kokborok-speaking Tripuri and Reang communities, and particularly those from non-Tibeto-Burman language backgrounds (Munda, Oraon, Santali), expressed difficulties comprehending SIMs and examination questions written in Bengali or English. The absence of study materials in Kokborok — the most widely spoken indigenous language in Tripura was repeatedly cited as a fundamental barrier to equitable learning.

***Socio-Cultural and Economic Barriers***

Beyond institutional factors, participants articulated a range of socio-cultural and economic barriers that shaped their engagement with ODL. Economic precarity was the most pervasive and fundamental constraint. Many participants reported difficulties in paying examination fees on time, affording required textbooks supplementary to the SIMs, and meeting transportation costs to study centres. While ODL fee structures are generally modest by comparison with conventional universities, even these costs represented a significant burden for households dependent on subsistence agriculture or irregular wage labour.

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Social isolation from academic peer networks was another consistently reported challenge. Campus-based students benefit from informal peer learning communities study groups, discussions with classmates, shared examination preparation that arise naturally from the co-presence of learners in a shared physical environment. ODL learners, particularly those in rural and semi-rural areas, reported a marked absence of such peer networks, creating a sense of academic aloneness that was both intellectually limiting and emotionally taxing. One participant from the Santali community described this vividly: 'When I have a question, there is nobody nearby who is studying the same things. My friends and family do not understand what I am studying. I am on my own with my books.'

Cultural dimensions of marginalisation were subtler but no less significant. Participants from several tribal communities noted that the curriculum content of their programmes particularly in social sciences and humanities rarely reflected their own cultural histories, indigenous governance systems, or community knowledge traditions. The implicit cultural assumption of ODL curricula mirrored that of mainstream higher education: the knowledge deemed worth knowing was predominantly shaped by dominant-caste, upper-class, and urban-centred epistemological frameworks. This cultural misalignment was experienced by some participants as a quiet but persistent form of exclusion being technically included in an educational system while remaining epistemically marginalised within it.

Gender-based constraints intersected with economic and cultural factors in complex ways for female participants. While ODL enabled women to pursue education within socially acceptable parameters (i.e., without leaving the community), several female participants reported that household responsibilities cooking, childcare, care of elderly family members left them with significantly less uninterrupted study time than their male counterparts. The flexibility of ODL thus had different practical meanings depending on the gendered domestic context in which learners were embedded.

***Aspirations, Agency, and Transformative Potential***

Despite the numerous challenges documented above, the overwhelming tenor of participant narratives was one of determined aspiration and remarkable resilience. Participants consistently expressed a profound belief in the transformative potential of education — not merely as a credential for employment, but as a process of personal development, social recognition, and community contribution. Many articulated a sense of pioneering responsibility: by becoming among the first members of their families or communities to pursue higher education, they saw themselves as opening pathways for younger generations.

One male participant from the Oraon community, a twenty-six-year-old who was simultaneously working as a construction labourer and studying for a Bachelor of Arts, expressed this with particular clarity: 'My father never went beyond Class 4. My mother is illiterate. When I finish my degree, it will be something that has never happened in my family before. I want to show my younger brother and my cousin sisters that it is possible. That is why I will not stop, however difficult it is.'

Several participants described ODL as having changed not only their educational trajectory but their relationship to their own sense of possibility. For female participants in particular, the pursuit of higher education through ODL was experienced as a quiet but significant act of self-assertion within social contexts that did not always readily support women's intellectual ambitions. These narratives of aspiration and agency resist a purely victimological account of indigenous ODL learners, pointing instead to the capacity of individuals to exercise meaningful choices within constrained circumstances a dynamic that the Capability Approach, as noted earlier, is well-positioned to illuminate.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Drawing on the empirical findings and the theoretical frameworks that have guided the analysis, the following recommendations are offered to policy makers, university administrators, and civil society actors concerned with strengthening ODL as an instrument of inclusive education for indigenous communities in Tripura.

### 7.1 Multilingual Study Materials

ODL institutions serving indigenous communities in Tripura should prioritise the development of self-instructional materials in Kokborok, the most widely spoken indigenous language in Tripura, in collaboration with the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) and indigenous language scholars. For communities speaking other tribal languages Reang, Jamatia, Chakma, Mog, Santali, Munda, and Oraon bilingual learning aids and glossaries in local languages should be developed as supplementary resources. The national language policy frameworks for higher education, particularly the National Education Policy 2020's emphasis on mother tongue instruction, provide strong normative support for such initiatives.

### 7.2 Strengthening Study Centre Infrastructure

Study centres serving predominantly tribal populations should be equipped with reliable internet connectivity, computing facilities, and a dedicated space for student study and peer learning. The government of Tripura should extend its Common Service Centre network in tribal block areas specifically to serve ODL learners, and ODL institutions should establish memoranda of understanding

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with TTAADC offices to leverage existing community infrastructure. The frequency of personal contact sessions at study centres should be increased, particularly for first-generation learners who require more intensive academic scaffolding.

**7.3 Targeted Financial Support**

A dedicated ODL scholarship scheme for ST students pursuing degrees through Open and Distance Learning modes of education in Tripura should be established, covering examination fees, study materials, and transportation to study centres. The existing National Scholarship Portal mechanisms for tribal scholarship disbursement should be adapted to include ODL learners, who are currently underserved by scholarship frameworks designed around campus-based education. Partnerships with the Tribal Welfare Department of Tripura should be explored to co-finance this scholarship provision.

**7.4 Gender-Responsive Programme Design**

Recognising the gendered constraints that shape female indigenous learners' engagement with ODL, institutions offering distance education in Tripura should develop gender-responsive support mechanisms including women's peer learning groups at study centres, mentorship networks connecting current female learners with recently graduated female students, and awareness campaigns in indigenous communities to build social support for women's educational participation. Assignment submission deadlines should accommodate seasonal and domestic labour cycles, and provisions for extended deadline requests should be formalised and made accessible.

**7.5 Curriculum Decolonisation and Cultural Responsiveness**

Curriculum development committees of ODL institutions in Tripura should include indigenous scholars and community representatives, with a mandate to review existing curricula for cultural relevance and to introduce elective modules on tribal history, indigenous governance, and traditional ecological knowledge. This does not require a wholesale replacement of existing curricula but rather a systematic effort to integrate indigenous epistemological perspectives into the intellectual landscape of ODL programmes, affirming the cultural identities of tribal learners as a pedagogical resource rather than a deviation from an assumed norm.

**7.6 Technology Equity**

ODL institutions in Tripura should develop a hybrid content delivery model that ensures no learner is excluded on grounds of digital access. Print-based self-instructional materials should remain the primary medium of instruction, with digital resources positioned as supplements rather than substitutes. ODL providers should negotiate with state and national digital connectivity schemes including BharatNet to prioritise extension of broadband infrastructure to tribal-majority blocks in West Tripura.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the role of Open and Distance Learning in promoting educational inclusion among indigenous communities in West Tripura District, with a focus on the lived experiences of indigenous students pursuing their degrees through various Open and Distance Learning modes of education. The findings illuminate a complex and ambivalent picture. On one hand, ODL represents a genuinely enabling modality for tribal learners who are structurally excluded from conventional higher education: it dissolves barriers of spatial distance, temporal rigidity, and residential cost that make campus-based study inaccessible. The motivational strength of participants, their resilience in the face of multiple overlapping disadvantages, and their articulation of education as a transformative force for themselves and their communities are testimonies to the meaningful, if imperfect, role that ODL is already playing in extending educational opportunity.

On the other hand, the study reveals that access to ODL is not equivalent to inclusion in any substantive sense. The structural barriers of linguistic exclusion, digital poverty, inadequate institutional support, economic precarity, and cultural misalignment of curricula continue to produce conditions in which indigenous learners must exert extraordinary personal effort simply to participate on terms that more privileged learners take for granted. If ODL is to fulfil its democratic promise for indigenous communities in Tripura, these structural conditions must be addressed through deliberate and sustained policy intervention.

The Capability Approach, educational inclusion theory, and postcolonial frameworks together remind us that genuine inclusion demands more than the removal of formal barriers to entry. It requires the active creation of conditions institutional, economic, linguistic, and cultural under which all learners can develop their capabilities, exercise their agency, and contribute their distinctive knowledge and perspectives to the shared project of higher education. For the nineteen tribal communities of Tripura, ODL can become such a vehicle. But this will require ODL institutions to reconceive themselves not merely as providers of flexible delivery mechanisms, but as institutions committed to educational justice institutions in which indigenous learners are not simply accommodated, but genuinely welcomed, affirmed, and empowered.

Future research should investigate the long-term occupational and social outcomes of indigenous ODL graduates in Tripura, the effectiveness of specific interventions such as multilingual SIMs and indigenous peer learning networks, and the perspectives of institutional actors counsellors, administrators, and programme designers on the challenges and possibilities of delivering inclusive

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ODL. Comparative studies across the Northeast Indian region, where similar configurations of indigeneity, geography, and educational access characterise the landscape, would further enrich the scholarship in this important field.

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