



Educational Empowerment Of Tribal Women In India: Challenges, Innovations, And Prospects

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Abstract

This research paper looks into the various aspects of educational empowerment for tribal women in India, focusing on the challenges they face, the social and political factors at play, and the impact of government policies. The study focuses on three main objectives: To study the major barriers restricting tribal women from accessing and continuing education, To study the role of political representation and social norms in tribal women's educational progress, To study the innovative strategies and government policies that support the educational empowerment of tribal women. This study employs a conceptual and analytical framework, integrating academic literature, policy documents, and specific contributions from relevant thematic studies to identify trends of marginalization and resilience. Research shows that even though programs like affirmative action and government initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and NEP 2020 have helped make education more accessible, serious issues like social and economic inequality, traditional gender roles, and differences between regions still hold back progress. The study highlights that meaningful participation in politics, participating in the community, and using education that respects different cultures are really important for addressing these issues. Moreover, new approaches like vocational training, boarding schools, online programs, and initiatives led by NGOs are starting to prove effective, especially when they match local requirements and are backed by the leadership of tribal women. The study concludes that helping tribal women through education needs more than just access; it also needs strategies that focus on quality, inclusivity, and giving them a voice. Educational empowerment is essential for development and is also crucial for achieving social justice in India's journey towards fairness and inclusion.

Keywords: Tribal, Gender, Tribal Women, Social Inclusion, Political Representation, Empowerment, Education

Introduction

In India's varied social and cultural scene, tribal communities have often been overlooked, and women in these groups deal with double discrimination - being part of indigenous communities and also facing challenges as women in a male - dominated society (Parveen & Imran, 2023). Even though the Constitution of India guarantees equal rights for everyone and provides special support for Scheduled Tribes in Articles 15(4), 46, and 275, there are still significant gaps in education, especially for tribal women (Gangwar, 2023).

Education is seen as a powerful way to empower people, helping them to better their economic situations, make their own choices, and get involved in improving society. For tribal women, education goes beyond just learning to read and write; it opens doors for them to rise socially, achieve gender equality, and embrace their culture (Chandra & Kumar, 2023). However, Rajak and Chauhan (2023) point out that these women are still not well represented in formal education because of several reasons like financial struggles, being in remote areas, cultural biases, poor facilities, and not having enough political voice.

The social and political systems make it even harder for tribal women to get a good education. Even though some tribal groups like the Khasi and Garo have traditions where women inherit property, they still face barriers when it comes to taking on leadership positions and being involved in politics (Rajak & Chauhan, 2023). Their opinions are seldom considered when it comes to making educational policies that impact them. Even with changes to the constitution and reserved spots for Scheduled Tribes in government and schools, deep-rooted inequalities still exist (Suman & Chauhan, 2023). Gender biases in both tribal and non-tribal settings, along with issues like poverty and lack of education, greatly limit the chances for tribal women to get an education.

Despite the challenges, new trends show promise. Programs such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojna are designed to specifically help educate tribal girls (Suman & Chauhan, 2023). In the same way, programs run by communities and NGOs that aim at building skills, promoting entrepreneurship, and raising awareness are starting to change the educational experiences of tribal women in areas like Odisha and Jharkhand (Rajak & Chauhan, 2023).

The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** highlights the importance of providing fair and quality education for everyone, focusing on closing the gaps between genders and different regions with a well-rounded and adaptable education system. Additionally, this study supports **Sustainable Development Goal 4**, which promotes fair and quality education for everyone and lifelong learning for all, as well as **Goal 5**, which aims to ensure gender equality and empower all women and girls.

This study looks into the various challenges that tribal women face when trying to get an education, investigates the social and political factors that affect their ability to participate in education, and reviews new ideas and policies that could help empower them. This paper tries to give a complete view of how

tribal women in India are empowered through education by combining history, real-life observations, and policy ideas.

Review of Related Literature

The education of tribal women in India shows a long history of being left out, which is tied to social and economic disadvantages, gender discrimination, and a lack of support from institutions. Research and policy discussions often point out several interconnected obstacles that prevent tribal women from gaining educational opportunities. These factors consist of poverty, cultural expectations, violence against genders, lack of political representation, and poor implementation of policies (Rajak & Chauhan, 2023; Parveen & Imran, 2023; Manna, 2024).

Historical Marginalization and Socio-Political Invisibility

In the past, tribal communities have mostly been left out of regular development and political discussions. Although women played important roles in their communities, their contributions were often overlooked in formal education and government. Even in matrilineal societies like the Khasi and Garo, tribal women still have little say in decision-making processes (Rajak & Chauhan, 2023). According to Manna (2024), tribal women play a key role in managing natural resources, yet they are often left out of important policy discussions, which makes their social and political presence less visible.

After gaining independence, efforts such as reservations and welfare programs for tribes started to tackle these inequalities, but their execution has been inconsistent across different areas. Suman and Chauhan (2023) highlight how tribal women are becoming more active in politics, especially in local government, which is crucial for promoting girls' education. However, Mohd Rafi Paray (2019) argues that unless tribal women are genuinely involved in decision-making, true progress will be out of reach.

The Gendered Nature of Tribal Educational Disadvantages

Education is seen as a keyway to empower people, but women in tribal communities' deal with specific obstacles because of their social status. Many girls are taken out of school to help at home, get married young, or work to earn money (Parveen & Imran, 2023; Singh, 2024). According to Singh (2024), low literacy levels, financial obstacles, and cultural traditions still prevent tribal women from getting an education, which keeps the cycle of poverty and exclusion going from one generation to the next.

Padmavathi and Devi (2024) point out that tribal women struggle with important education measures like the Gender Parity Index and Gross Enrolment Ratio. They face high dropout rates and lack motivation, which often come from systemic oppression and financial difficulties, making it harder for them to succeed in education. This connects with previous research by Gangwar (2023), which highlights that tribal girls are at a higher risk of dropping out of school because of ongoing neglect and insufficient school facilities that consider their gender needs.

Chakraborty and others (2021), as mentioned by Rajak and Chauhan (2023), state that access to healthcare is strongly connected to education. The health issues faced by tribal women make their

educational struggles even worse. These challenges for women are made worse by male-dominated social systems that limit their freedom, rights, and dreams (Manna, 2024; Mohd Rafi Paray, 2019).

Past Efforts and Missed Targets: Political Will vs. Implementation Gaps

India has launched various programs such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and Tribal Sub-Plan, but the results have been mixed. According to Suman and Chauhan (2023), even with laws backing these initiatives, the actual execution on the ground is poor because of bureaucratic issues and cultural pushback. In the same way, Padmavathi and Devi (2024) point out that policies usually overlook the unique situations of tribal women, which results in low enrollment and high dropout rates.

Manna (2024) and Mohd Rafi Paray (2019) point out a big gap between what policies say and what really happens. Even though affirmative action looks good on paper, it often doesn't lead to fair benefits in real life. These researchers are urging for monitoring systems that consider gender and tribal contexts to make sure that policies actually make a difference instead of just looking good.

Behar (2019), mentioned in Rajak and Chauhan (2023), criticizes the Forest Rights Act for not doing enough to empower tribal women, even though it was meant to give them more say in decisions. Without proper knowledge and training, women can't access their legal rights.

Role of Tribal Women Leaders and Traditional Systems

Even with numerous challenges, women from tribes have shown their strength and leadership in both local and regional development. Women leaders at the grassroots level are crucial in encouraging girls' education and starting community initiatives (Suman & Chauhan, 2023). Programs like self-help groups and small business activities, especially those backed by NGOs, have positively influenced economic independence and social progress (Rajak & Chauhan, 2023).

Singh (2024) along with Padmavathi and Devi (2024) emphasize the importance of skill development and vocational training in the education of tribal women. These initiatives not only boost job prospects but also enhance self-esteem and respect within the community, leading to positive changes in tribal society.

Additionally, Manna (2024) has also emphasized the need for specific actions to boost the involvement of tribal women in governance and institutional frameworks, which is vital for turning community insights into effective policy advocacy. Therefore, political empowerment along with education is a key factor for real development.

Research Gaps

Although existing research provides important information about the difficulties and policies affecting the education of tribal women, there isn't much comprehensive analysis that links structural obstacles to political involvement and creative educational methods. Most studies look at these issues separately, missing a complete view that considers the connections between gender, tribal identity, and systemic exclusion. This research seeks to address that issue by examining how these elements work

together to enhance the educational empowerment of tribal women in India and finding effective ways to create lasting and sustainable change.

Research Objectives

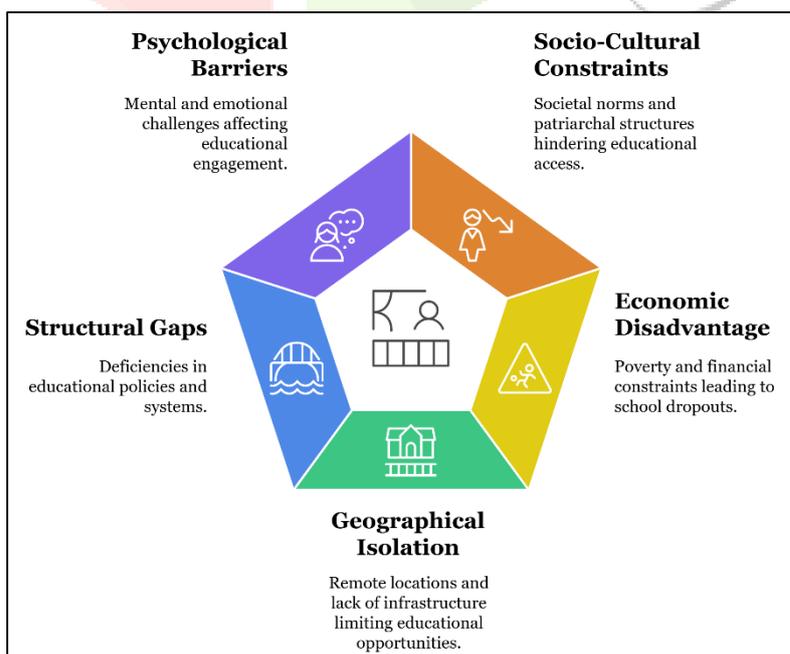
1. To study the major barriers restricting tribal women from accessing and continuing education.
2. To study the role of political representation and social norms in tribal women’s educational progress.
3. To study the innovative strategies and government policies that support the educational empowerment of tribal women.

Research Methodology

This study is theoretical and conceptual in nature, based on a critical review of existing literature related to the educational empowerment of tribal women in India. It employs qualitative content analysis to identify key themes such as structural barriers, gender-based exclusion, political participation, and policy interventions. Secondary data from research articles, government reports, policy papers, are used to explain findings.

Objective 1: To study the major barriers restricting tribal women from accessing and continuing education

The obstacles that prevent tribal women from getting and staying in school are really tied up in a mix of social, economic, cultural, geographical, and institutional issues. These challenges are complex and interconnected, forming a cycle of educational disadvantage that is hard to overcome without ongoing and focused efforts.



1. Socio-Cultural Constraints and Patriarchal Norms

A major ongoing issue is the social and cultural system that shapes tribal life. Even though India's tribal communities are culturally diverse, traditional gender roles usually keep women confined to home duties, which restricts their presence and independence in education. In many tribes, traditional beliefs still make it hard for girls to get a proper education, especially after elementary school. These beliefs are often supported by things like getting married young, having to take care of the house, and not having much say in their own lives, especially for married women (Manna, 2024; Mohd Rafi Paray, 2019).

In tribal communities, the idea that girls' education is less important than boys' is made worse by a long history of not being able to read and write, language differences, and a reluctance to adapt to the formal education system. In areas where tribal women are crucial for the economy and rely on forests for their livelihoods, their influence is still missing when it comes to choices about education and being involved in the community (Manna, 2024).

2. Economic Disadvantage and Poverty-Driven Dropouts

Financial struggles continue to be a major obstacle for tribal girls' education. When families are poor, girls are often expected to help out at home, whether it's doing chores, gathering resources, or working during certain seasons. Because of this, many girls have to leave school to help their families, especially during busy farming times or when things get tough. Research have indicated that this financial strain hits female students the hardest, resulting in fewer enrollments, inconsistent attendance, and higher dropout rates (Singh, 2024; Padmavathi & Devi, 2024).

A lot of tribal areas don't have enough financial support or proper facilities like hostels, scholarships, and free meals that could help make education more affordable. Even when these resources are offered, they often don't reach the people who need them or aren't applied consistently, which makes it harder for students to stay in school and can lead to dropping out.

3. Geographical Isolation and Infrastructure Gaps

The distance of tribal villages makes it really hard for people to get to schools. There aren't many schools close by, and the long, unsafe trips, along with bad transportation and missing basic facilities like toilets, lights, and classrooms, lead to fewer students attending, especially girls in their teenage years. The lack of private bathrooms and safe spaces in schools makes it harder for girls to participate, especially when they go through puberty and menstruation (Padmavathi & Devi, 2024; Singh, 2024).

Additionally, areas with tribal communities frequently face issues like inconsistent teacher assignments, high rates of teacher absenteeism, and a shortage of female educators. These problems make parents hesitant to enroll their daughters in school. This situation highlights a significant failure in effectively tackling geographical disparities in education through focused planning.

4. Structural and Policy-Level Gaps

Even though there are national and state policies to support tribal education and gender equality, there's a big gap when it comes to actually putting these policies into action locally. The lack of culturally relevant teaching materials, strict language rules, and a one-size-fits-all approach to governance often

leaves tribal students feeling disconnected. Even though there are laws and programs in place, tribal women often miss out on the benefits because of slow government processes, not knowing about the programs, and poor oversight (Mohd Rafi Paray, 2019; Manna, 2024).

A major problem is that tribal women are not represented in decision-making groups and school management committees. When they aren't included in these areas, the education services provided often don't match the actual experiences of the communities they are supposed to help.

5. Psychological and Motivational Barriers

Tribal girls face challenges in getting an education due to feelings of inferiority, low goals, and not having enough role models to look up to. Many tribal women also struggle with confidence when dealing with formal systems, especially in places where education seems unimportant for their way of life or where their families have had bad experiences with schools. Without mentoring programs or peer support networks, tribal girls often drop out of school, even if the facilities are available (Padmavathi & Devi, 2024).

Moreover, stories of feeling inferior get stronger when schools ignore tribal identities and ways of knowing, making students feel left out or unimportant in traditional education.

These obstacles—like cultural, economic, geographical, and structural issues—are connected and work together, forming a cycle of disadvantage that limits educational opportunities for tribal women. A deeper understanding of these overlapping challenges will not just fix policies but will also help to rethink education as a way to empower tribal communities in a way that connects with their real-life experiences.

Objective 2: To study the role of political representation and social norms in tribal women's educational progress

The progress of education for tribal women in India is heavily influenced by two connected factors: political representation and deep-rooted social norms. Even though there are constitutional protections like Articles 330, 332, and 15(4) to help include Scheduled Tribes in democracy, the actual impact of these rights on the educational advancement of tribal women is still quite restricted. The lack of political representation, male-dominated structures, and cultural traditions still hold back the power of education to empower people (Sonavane & Kulkarni, 2024; Dr.K.B.Nayak, 2025).

Even though tribal women play a big role in helping their communities, they usually don't have official positions in governance or decision-making. This is true even in places with matrilineal traditions, like some areas in the Northeast, where their involvement in politics is still restricted because of long-standing male-dominated systems and not enough opportunities for political training (Manna, 2024; Chakraborty, 2013). Even though more women are voting now, there are still very few in leadership positions that can actually shape education policies (Mohd Rafi Paray, 2019).

Political representation can really help improve education. When tribal women leaders get involved in local government, they often push for schools that consider gender issues, better living conditions in hostels, and learning spaces that include everyone. Their efforts help make education for tribal girls more visible and accepted in their culture (Rajak & Chauhan, 2023). These leaders serve as role models, pushing back against stereotypes that limit women to home life and demonstrating to young girls how education can change their lives.

But these improvements are really limited by strong social and cultural rules. Things like getting married young, having to do housework, and focusing more on boys' education than girls still happen in tribal communities. These practices are usually defended by tradition, but they consistently limit girls' opportunities for ongoing education and personal growth (Parveen & Imran, 2023).

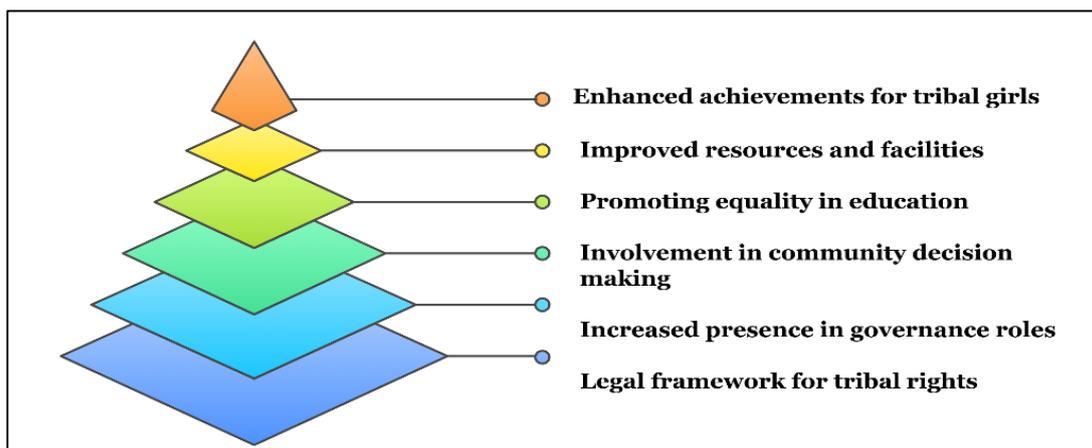
Education in tribal settings is also shaped by how people perceive education. Often, formal schooling doesn't fit well with traditional gender roles or ways to make a living. As a result, families might pull their daughters out of school because they view education as just a short step before getting married, rather than a way to gain independence (Chandra & Kumar, 2023).

This perspective is supported by the lack of tribal women in school management committees and village education councils, which makes it harder for educational planning to connect with what's actually happening on the ground. Because of this, even the most forward-thinking policies struggle to overcome cultural obstacles within the community (Gangwar, 2023). When school programs and don't consider different cultures, it makes it hard for tribal students, especially girls, to feel motivated and involved (Padmavathi & Devi, 2024; Singh, 2024).

Even though programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya have been started, they still struggle to work well in places where people are not open to change. Additionally, when tribal women are not present in important policy discussions and government organizations, it weakens their ability to confront these norms from inside the system (Suman & Chauhan, 2023).

To really improve education for tribal women, we need to do more than just start programs. We have to make two big changes: empower tribal women politically and kickstart social change within their communities. Strategies need to be customized to meet the specific gender expectations in tribal settings and create more opportunities for tribal women to take on leadership roles in education and community

affairs. This flowchart shows that if constitutional rules are put into action through political representation and local governance, it can result in better education for tribal girls.



Objective 3: To study the innovative strategies and government policies that support the educational empowerment of tribal women

In recent years, the education of tribal women in India has changed a lot thanks to new strategies and government support. Still, how effective these methods are can vary greatly from one area to another, so it's important to keep evaluating and adjusting them.

1. Policy Frameworks and Targeted Schemes

A major part of government help has been creating educational programs designed for underprivileged tribal communities. Important projects like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) aim to boost the number of girls enrolling and staying in elementary schools. These programs provide housing, food assistance, and teaching methods that consider gender to help reduce the number of tribal girls dropping out of school. Additionally, the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) and Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojna (VKY) direct funds to tribal regions to enhance infrastructure, increase the number of teachers, and support overall growth in education, health, and job opportunities.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has also recognized the importance of inclusion and equity. Its emphasis on flexible learning pathways, mother-tongue instruction, and gender-sensitive education promises a more contextually aware model for tribal education, aligning with community needs.

2. Innovation in Delivery: Skill, Technology, and Community Integration

To break down old obstacles such as being far away or feeling left out, a bunch of cool new ideas have come up. These ideas are things like mobile learning units, online classrooms, and learning programs that involve the community. For instance, tech-based platforms are starting to reach remote regions, giving tribal girls access to digital resources that they wouldn't have in traditional school settings (Padmavathi & Devi, 2024).

Additionally, skill development and job training have become a bigger part of education for tribal women. These programs not only help them get jobs but also promote ongoing learning. Initiatives from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, like Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) and skill training through the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), promote a combined approach to education and economic growth.

3. Holistic Approaches and NGO Participation

Comprehensive development plans that combine education, nutrition, health, and leadership training are really important for tribal communities. NGOs and community groups are key players in this, providing programs for adults, literacy classes, and mentoring for teens to support ongoing learning (Singh, 2024; Padmavathi & Devi, 2024). For example, self-help groups (SHGs) that concentrate on small businesses and adult learning have played a key role in helping tribal women gain economic independence and boost their self-esteem (Sarangi, 2024).

Community-driven school programs have shown to be successful in overcoming cultural barriers because they encourage local involvement in education. They often include local knowledge, stories, and teach in two languages, which makes learning more relatable to the culture.

4. Barriers in Policy Implementation

Even with many policies and programs in place, putting them into action is still a big challenge. Differences between regions, not enough training for teachers, a lack of relevant curricula, and traditional gender roles in tribal communities are still blocking progress in education (Dutta, 2012; Singh, 2024). Even though laws like the Forest Rights Act help tribal women gain land ownership and legal rights, their effect on education is weakened because of bad implementation and a lack of awareness among these women (Sarangi, 2024).

Additionally, there are still challenges that hold people back. The absence of relatable role models, restricted access to colleges, and significant opportunity costs like family duties cause many tribal girls to drop out of school early and have lower educational goals (Padmavathi & Devi, 2024).

5. Toward Gender-Inclusive and Region-Specific Strategies

An effective plan for empowering tribal women through education needs to be more flexible and tailored. It should include creating gender-sensitive curriculums, running awareness campaigns for parents, and ensuring that tribal women have a voice in local school governance through their representation in Panchayati Raj institutions to make a real difference. Initiatives such as the Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana and Rashtriya Mahila Kosh emphasize how crucial financial independence is for advancing education.

It's really important to combine skill and vocational training with regular education so that it connects with what students actually experience in their lives. We need to broaden our policies to help build self-esteem, confidence, and dreams for tribal girls.

Findings and Discussion

The study shows that tribal women in India still deal with many tough obstacles when it comes to getting and staying in school. These issues mainly come from financial struggles, cultural expectations, poor facilities, getting married young, and having to take care of family duties (Singh, 2024; Padmavathi & Devi, 2024). Even though there are constitutional protections and specific programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, the number of tribal women getting an education is still really low, especially in far-off areas where many drop out and there aren't enough schools (Dutta, 2012; Dr. K. B. Nayak, 2025).

Political representation seems great in theory, but it hasn't fully led to better education for everyone. Even though some tribal women have been given leadership positions in local government, their real power is often limited by traditional gender roles and a lack of support from the system (Rajak & Chauhan, 2023). In places where tribal women have really gained political power, we can see new grassroots efforts that support girls' education and get the community involved in schooling (Manna, 2024; Sarangi, 2024).

Recently, changes in education policies like the National Education Policy 2020 and programs such as the Eklavya Model Residential Schools and Vanbandhu Kalyan Yojana show a move towards more inclusive systems. However, their effectiveness varies greatly by region and relies a lot on how capable the state is, the quality of local governance, and how well these initiatives fit with local cultures (Padmavathi & Devi, 2024; Singh, 2024). Some methods like vocational training, tech-based learning, and including local knowledge have really helped make education more accessible and meaningful (Parveen & Imran, 2023).

Non-profit groups and organisations are still helping out by providing reading programs, leadership training, and community awareness events specifically designed for the needs of tribal women (Chakraborty, 2013; Mohd Rafi Paray, 2019). However, the difference between making policies and actually putting them into action shows a lasting gap that needs both changes in how things are run and a change in how people think.

Overall, the results show that even though structural changes have started to make a difference, real progress will rely on ongoing efforts to break down social and cultural obstacles and to support tribal women as important participants in their education.

Conclusion

The story of tribal women's education in India shows both strong determination and ongoing challenges. Even with laws and policies designed to help, progress in education is still inconsistent because of deep-seated inequalities related to location, gender expectations, caste, and cultural traditions. Even though affirmative action has helped people get into schools and politics, there are still big problems like poor execution and cultural pushback that stop real change from happening. Political representation is getting better, but it doesn't always lead to better education unless there's real involvement and local leaders. Programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, KGBV, and NEP 2020 seem good, but they really work best when they're adapted to fit local cultures and needs. To address these issues and challenges, we need to do more than just improve infrastructure; we have to rethink our policies to make sure that the voices of tribal women are central to changes in education. To create a fair and inclusive future for India, we need to focus on educating tribal women, not just as a goal for development, but as something essential for democracy and society.

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