POLICY BRIEF#7

Reconsidering Residential Schooling for Tribal Communities in India

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ABOUT

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In December 2021, the Ministry of Science and Technology, Department of Science and Technology (Policy Research Programme) made an open call for the submission of Expressions of Interest in STI Policy Research towards the Establishment of the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) by the academic and research Institutes In India. After multiple rounds of consultations and review, the DST-CPR at NISER received the final sanction order from the Government of India, Ministry of Science & Technology, Department of Science & Technology, bearing the letter No DST/PRC/CPR/NISER Bhubaneswar-2023 (G) (PCPM) dated 29/03/2023. The primary focus of the DST-CPR at NISER is to study the Energy Transition and the secondary focus is to study the Tribal Education, and Innovations for Tribal Education in Eastern India covering Odisha, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and West Bengal.

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Executive Summary

India's tribal education policy has historically relied on residential institutions, commonly referred to as Ashram schools. These schools were initially established with the aim of addressing the socioeconomic and geographical barriers faced by tribal communities in accessing education. However, a growing body of research and policy evaluations has revealed persistent and systemic issues within this model, including inadequate infrastructure, poorly managed hostels, instances of child abuse, weak accountability mechanisms, and a significant cultural disconnect between the schools and the tribal communities they are intended to serve.

Given these challenges, the current residential schooling model appears to have reached the limits of its effectiveness as the primary strategy for tribal education. This policy brief proposes a paradigm shift toward a decentralized educational framework through the establishment of Panchayat Schools. This model is designed to enhance equity and accountability by fostering community oversight, enabling localized decision-making, and incorporating tribal knowledge systems and cultural practices into the curriculum. It offers a participatory and democratic alternative to the assimilationist and top-down structure of Ashram schools.

Importantly, the proposed model aligns with constitutional mandates on local self-governance and addresses longstanding policy recommendations for greater community involvement in educational processes. Nonetheless, successful implementation requires sustained support from both state and central governments, particularly in ensuring uniform quality standards, equitable allocation of resources, and robust institutional mechanisms. In the absence of such support, decentralization risks reinforcing existing regional disparities rather than alleviating them.

Reconsidering Residential Schooling for Tribal Communities in India

1. Introduction

Residential schools have historically been regarded as the most effective means of addressing the diverse educational challenges faced by tribal children in India. In addition to residential schooling, the two principal interventions in tribal education policy have been the provision of scholarships and the implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual education. Commonly referred to as Ashram schools, these residential institutions are present across all Indian states with significant tribal populations. In Odisha, where tribal communities constitute approximately 22.8% of the population, a wide array of residential educational institutions exists, including Ashram schools, Sevashrams, Kanyashrams, educational complexes for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), urban hostels, and private residential schools. The Xaxa Committee Report (2014) characterises this phenomenon as the "ashramisation of tribal education" (p. 160), indicating a systemic overemphasis on residential schooling within tribal education policy frameworks.

The Policy Brief begins with a brief historical overview of Ashram schools and then reviews empirical studies and policy evaluations to highlight critical concerns regarding the functioning and impact of Ashram schools. The Policy Brief concludes by proposing a decentralised model of education delivery that aims to foster a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape for tribal communities in India.

2. Emergence of Ashram schools

During colonial rule in India, tribal populations were largely excluded from access to formal education. According to the 1951 Census, the literacy rate among tribal communities stood at a mere 3.46%. The British colonial administration introduced a modern education system primarily aimed at non-tribal elites, operating under the assumption that educational benefits would eventually trickle down to the broader population. However, beginning in the 1850s, Christian missionaries established schools in select tribal regions. These institutions not only provided educational opportunities but also served as centres for the Christianization of tribal communities.

In response to the growing influence of missionaries, Ashram schools were introduced in the 1920s as an indigenous countermeasure. Two distinct models of Ashram schools emerged during this period: one based on Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of Basic Education, and the other aimed at promoting Hindutva ideology among tribal groups (Gupta & Padel, 2019). Key figures in the early Ashram school movement included Jugatram Dave, who founded the Swaraj Ashram in 1923; A. V. Thakkar, associated with the Bhil Seva Mandal (1923) and the Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh (1949); Verrier Elwin, who established the Gond Seva Mandal in 1932; and R. K. Deshpande, founder of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram in 1952 (Mishra & Dhir, 2005).

Both Christian missionaries and certain early advocates of Ashram schools shared the belief that tribal communities were primitive, uncivilised, and bound by superstition. From their perspective, the 'civilising' of tribal children required an education that was deliberately distanced from tribal culture and social practices. Hindu nationalists, in particular, contended that tribal culture was either inherently rooted in Hinduism or should

be aligned with it. They too supported the establishment of Ashram schools as institutions where Hindu values and teachings could be systematically imparted.

The term *Ashram*, derived from Sanskrit, traditionally means "the household of the teacher." In the Hindu tradition, Ashrams are spiritual and educational centres that emphasise discipline, moral instruction, and religious learning. Notably, in the present educational system, the designation "Ashram school" is used exclusively for government residential schools established for Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs), with no parallel usage for other groups.

3. Growth of Ashram schools

Following India's independence, tribal education witnessed significant expansion. During the First Five-Year Plan, approximately 4,000 schools were established in tribal regions, including 1,000 Ashram schools (Mishra & Dhir, 2005). Tribal children were presented with three main educational options: Ashram schools, which followed their own curriculum; mainstream schools, which were largely disconnected from tribal realities; or hybrid models that combined a residential, Ashram-like atmosphere with the formal curriculum and examinations of common schools, supplemented by training in one or two vocational crafts (Renuka Ray Committee, 1959).

Multiple commissions and policy documents—such as the Elwin Committee (1960), the Dhebar Commission (1960–61), the Kothari Commission (1964–66), and the National Policies on Education (1968, 1986)—endorsed the proliferation of Ashram schools. These were especially recommended in sparsely populated tribal areas, for denotified communities, and at the secondary education level. Ashram schools were credited with increasing enrolment rates and reducing absenteeism and dropout levels. In addition to offering a structured learning environment, these schools were seen as protective spaces that shielded tribal children from poverty-related challenges such as malnutrition.

Since 1990, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has implemented a dedicated scheme for establishing Ashram schools in Tribal Sub-Plan areas. In subsequent years, other residential education models have emerged, including Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV). In Odisha, the Department for the Development of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes (SSD) currently oversees 1,737 residential educational institutions serving approximately 426,000 ST and SC students (Government of Odisha, 2023). This network includes 716 Ashram schools, 32 Eklavya schools, and four educational complexes.

In recent years, Ashram schools have attracted public attention—often for negative reasons—prompting scholars to examine their structure, performance, and potential areas for reform. For instance, Upadhyay et al. (2005) investigated the psychological impact of overcrowding in Ashram schools in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Jojo (2013) conducted a comparative analysis of school infrastructure, staffing, facilities, and the quality of curricular and extracurricular offerings in Ashram schools across Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha. A study by Kakade et al. (2018), undertaken by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, assessed the nutritional and health needs of adolescent girls in Ashram schools in Maharashtra. In Odisha, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI, 2019) carried out a comprehensive evaluation of Ashram schools, focusing on adherence to guidelines, student learning outcomes, stakeholder feedback, and the overall performance of the schools.

4. Concerns surrounding Ashram schools

The studies on Ashram schools highlight three primary areas of concern, which are outlined below.

3.1 Lack of facilities, poor maintenance, corruption, and abuse of students

Media reports on Ashram schools frequently highlight serious issues, including cases of food poisoning, student deaths, sexual abuse, and the misappropriation of funds and resources. One of the most persistent concerns is the wide disparity in infrastructure and facilities across these schools. As documented in the SCSTRTI (2019) evaluation, many Ashram schools lack essential amenities such as separate toilets for girls, emergency power backups, dining halls, functional drainage systems, smokeless cooking arrangements, playgrounds, computer laboratories, and an adequate number of classrooms.

Overcrowding in hostels is common, with student numbers often exceeding the sanctioned capacity. In addition, there are numerous vacancies in both teaching and non-teaching positions, which further undermines the quality of education and care. The administration of these schools is frequently marked by lawlessness and a culture of impunity (Thadathil & Danane, 2017). Between 2010 and 2015, a total of 882 student deaths were reported in Ashram schools nationwide (Dungdung et al., 2021). In Odisha alone, 155 student deaths and 16 reported cases of sexual abuse occurred during this period (Santoshini, 2019).

In response, the Government of Odisha has initiated several reforms aimed at improving oversight and accountability. These include the creation of a dedicated monitoring cell and control room for schools and hostels, the development of a Smart Hostel Management System to facilitate real-time data collection, and the introduction of ISO 9001:2015 certification processes for school hostels. Additionally, local officials are now required to conduct regular inspections of these institutions.

Despite these interventions, incidents of abuse, neglect, and administrative mismanagement continue to emerge in the public domain. This persistent pattern underscores the need for a more fundamental re-evaluation of the residential school model and its suitability for tribal education.

3.2 The question of assimilation vs integration

During the colonial period, the British administration adopted an isolationist approach toward tribal communities, deliberately excluding them from mainstream political and administrative structures. Over time, this policy was increasingly questioned for its adverse effects on tribal development. Scholars such as sociologist G. S. Ghurye contested the rationale for tribal isolation, arguing instead that tribal groups were simply "backward Hindus" who had historically coexisted harmoniously with caste Hindus. This perspective advocated for the assimilation of tribal communities into mainstream Hindu society.

In contrast, the newly independent Indian state, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, chose to pursue a more balanced approach—one of integration rather than assimilation (Singh, 1982). In the realm of education, this integrative vision was reflected in early policy recommendations. The Elwin Committee Report (1960) cautioned that tribal education should not create "a wide gulf between the educated tribal and their own way of life" (p. 72), while the Dhebar Committee Report (1961) called for cultivating "an ambience of tribal culture in the schools" (p. 217). Despite these early commitments, contemporary tribal education programmes often reflect an assimilationist logic disguised as integration (Xaxa Committee, 2014).

Empirical studies have highlighted a profound cultural disconnect between the environment of Ashram schools and the everyday lives of tribal children (Gupta & Padel, 2018). This pattern resonates with the discredited histories of residential and boarding schools for Indigenous children in North America and Australia, which are now widely recognised as instruments of cultural and linguistic genocide (Dungdung et al., 2021).

In India, Ashram schools frequently exhibit similar cultural insensitivities. Prevailing attitudes often continue to portray tribal communities as primitive or inferior (Sundar, 2010), and little attention is paid to tribal worldviews or traditions within the school environment (Jojo, 2013). Aspects of tribal identity—such as traditional clothing, ornaments, hairstyles, knowledge systems, and values—are typically excluded from the daily life of these schools. Tribal culture is relegated to the realm of folklore, celebrated only occasionally and often in tokenistic ways, as if it belongs in a museum rather than in the lived experiences of students.

Ashram schools seldom commemorate local heroes or celebrate tribal festivals. As such, the Ashram school model continues to perpetuate a colonial mindset, offering limited support for the cultural affirmation and identity of tribal children. Rather than empowering students to maintain and celebrate their heritage, these institutions risk alienating them from their roots.

3.3 The purpose of tribal education

The education provided to tribal children in India has frequently been criticised as inappropriate and ill-suited to their cultural and social contexts (Sundar, 2010; Veerbhadranaika et al., 2012). Although debates around the relevance and nature of tribal education have existed since the pre-independence period, designing educational programmes that respond to the specific needs of tribal communities while upholding the principle of equity remains a persistent challenge.

This is especially troubling in the current context, where tribal lands are increasingly targeted for industrial exploitation, and tribal communities are engaged in ongoing efforts to resist displacement and protect their natural and cultural heritage. Rather than equipping students to engage with these challenges, the education they receive often reinforces the ideology of industrial development (Gupta & Padel, 2019). Judith Walker (2018) describes, this as a form of "extraction education," which supports the interests of resource extraction industries. Such an education paradigm not only undermines tribal resistance movements but also limits the capacity of tribal youth to imagine and articulate alternative models of development that align with their cultural and ecological priorities.

4. Rationale for decentralisation in tribal education

The systemic issues of neglect, weak accountability, and cultural alienation experienced by tribal children are unlikely to be resolved through incremental reforms to the existing Ashram school model. Instead, a decentralized approach to education—rooted in community participation and cultural responsiveness—offers a promising and transformative alternative. Yet, despite widespread recognition of its value, few Indian states have meaningfully implemented decentralized educational frameworks. A notable exception is Nagaland, where community members are empowered to determine teachers' salaries, reflecting a higher degree of local control (Gupta & Padel, 2019).

When children are enrolled in remote residential schools, parents are effectively excluded from oversight, and local elected representatives typically intervene only in the event of a crisis. A decentralized framework could accommodate local languages, oral histories, festivals, and indigenous art forms, integrating them meaningfully into the educational experience.

Community ownership of schools is also key to improving enrollment and retention. When families and local leaders have a genuine stake in educational institutions, they are more likely to support children's continued participation. Parents shift from being passive recipients of state-directed programs to active agents in their children's learning journeys.

Decentralization in education has yielded positive outcomes in several international contexts, including Colombia, Bolivia, and Pakistan (Upadhyay & Rajasekhar, 2020). Within

India, constitutional and policy frameworks such as the 73rd Amendment (which empowers Panchayati Raj Institutions), the Right to Education Act (2009), and the National Education Policy (2020) all emphasize community engagement in school governance. These principles have been institutionalized through mechanisms like Village Education Committees (VECs), School Development and Monitoring Committees (SDMCs), and School Management Committees (SMCs). However, in practice, these bodies often remain ineffective due to a combination of factors, including unclear mandates, lack of awareness, financial dependence on higher authorities, political interference, widespread poverty, social inequality, illiteracy, and cultural marginalization.

Despite these limitations, the idea of educational decentralization continues to hold promise due to its intrinsic potential to democratize education and empower communities (Arenas, 2005). The following section outlines strategies for effectively implementing decentralized models in the context of tribal education.

5. The Panchayat School model: An operational framework

We propose the establishment of Panchayat-level schools, modelled on the lines of the *Adarsha Vidyalayas* currently present in each block of Odisha. However, unlike the centrally administered *Adarsha Vidyalayas*, these Panchayat schools should be primarily governed by the respective Gram Panchayats, ensuring stronger local oversight and accountability. Depending on the population size and geographical area of each Panchayat, one or two large schools will be established per Panchayat instead of having separate schools in every village. Each village will have an upgraded Anganwadi Centre to offer five years of foundational education for children aged three to eight. Older children can attend the centralized Panchayat school. To ensure accessibility, the Panchayat will provide transportation facilities, including doorstep pick-up services. The following recommendations outline a possible structure for these schools, aiming to address the shortcomings of Ashram schools and enhance educational outcomes for tribal communities:

- Equitable Educational Access: To promote inclusivity and equity, Panchayat schools offering education from Class 3 to Class 12 should be established in every Gram Panchayat, rather than being limited to tribal-dominated areas. These schools should serve students from all communities within the Panchayat, fostering a multicultural environment conducive to cross-cultural exchange and learning. It is imperative that such institutions meet standardized infrastructure and quality benchmarks.
- Early Childhood and Foundational Education: Children should attend nearby schools for pre-primary education up to Class 2. In remote tribal hamlets, where such facilities are often lacking, Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) can be strengthened to provide foundational education up to Class 2, as recommended by Das et al. (2024). This will require infrastructural improvements in AWCs, the integration of nearby primary schools where applicable, and the provision of specialized training for Anganwadi workers. Moreover, qualified teachers from within local tribal communities should be recruited to ensure culturally relevant and effective pedagogy.
- Hostel Facilities: Panchayat schools should include residential hostels Hostel accommodations should be prioritized for students from the most remote villages within the Panchayat. Given the relatively small number of such students, overcrowding is unlikely to be a concern.
- Transportation Services: School bus services should be made available to students who live within a reasonable distance from the Panchayat school but do not require hostel accommodation. The planning, funding, and

management of transportation services should be entrusted to the Gram Panchayat. Reliable transportation is essential for improving attendance and reducing dropout rates. Placement in hostels should be considered only when transportation is not a feasible option.

- Community Accountability for Enrollment and Retention: The responsibility of ensuring universal enrollment and preventing dropout should rest jointly with teachers and the Gram Panchayat. Local governance bodies should play an active role in tracking school attendance, identifying at-risk students, and engaging with families to ensure continued participation in education.
- Teacher Recruitment and Cadre Development: Panchayat schools can be supported by establishing a new cadre of locally recruited teachers. Based on the specific needs of each school, Panchayats should have the autonomy to appoint teachers. In schools with a significant tribal student population, bilingual educators may be required to provide effective language support. Additionally, teachers specializing in local arts, crafts, and cultural practices can also be recruited to enhance the relevance and richness of education.
- Governance and Monitoring Mechanism: To ensure effective oversight, we propose the formation of a *Panchayat School Education Committee* (PSEC) under the governance of the Gram Panchayat. This committee should include the elected Sarpanch, and one parent from each village of the panchayat, local education activists or retired teachers, the school headmaster, one nominated teacher, and a representative of tribal or other disadvantaged communities (if not already represented). The PSEC should be empowered to review student performance and teacher attendance, monitor hostel facilities, plan parent-teacher meetings and community outreach initiatives, and recommend curriculum and cultural adaptations based on student demographics. In alignment with existing institutional structures, efforts should be made to explore how the PSEC could collaborate with the School Management Committee (SMC).
- Cultural Integration and Language Inclusion: To address the cultural alienation often experienced in Ashram schools, Panchayat schools should actively incorporate local languages and traditions. In schools with a substantial number of tribal students, this could involve the use of bilingual teachers, school environments that reflect tribal aesthetics, academic calendars aligned with local festivals, and the inclusion of regional art forms and crafts in the curriculum. School curriculum should also include community-relevant content, drawing on local knowledge systems, and addressing specific social and environmental challenges faced by the region.
- Role of the State and Central Governments: While the Panchayat school model emphasizes local ownership and contextual learning, a balanced role for state and central governments remains essential. Governments must establish common minimum standards in areas such as infrastructure, safety, student-teacher ratios, and learning outcomes. Furthermore, they should provide financial and technical assistance to resource-constrained Panchayats to ensure that no region is left behind. Such a framework can support equity across regions while preserving the flexibility and responsiveness that decentralised education demands.

6. Expected Outcomes and Challenges

In the short term, Panchayat schools are likely to witness improved enrolment and

attendance, along with reduced dropout rates—driven by factors such as safer transportation, proximity to students' homes, and more welcoming school and hostel environments. A decline in incidents of harassment and mismanagement in hostels can also be expected due to greater community oversight. Increased involvement of the community will not only enhance teacher accountability and motivation but will also encourage the Panchayat School Education Committees (PSECs) to begin exploring ways to meaningfully incorporate local culture into the educational experience.

Over time, these schools have the potential to fully integrate local traditions, languages, and values into both the learning environment and the curriculum. This will contribute significantly to the preservation of cultural heritage and instill a sense of pride within the community. The active participation of Panchayats in school governance can further deepen democratic engagement and strengthen participatory practices at the grassroots level. Most importantly, a community-responsive education system will equip students to define and engage with development on their own terms—whether through higher education, vocational pursuits, or local enterprise.

However, for the Panchayat school model to succeed, several challenges must be addressed. Many Panchayats currently lack the administrative, financial, and technical capacity to manage educational institutions effectively. Comprehensive training programs and sustained support systems will be essential to prepare them for this role. Successful implementation will also require coordinated efforts across key departments—Education, Tribal Welfare, and Panchayati Raj. Additionally, there is a risk that dominant local actors may capture control of school governance, thereby sidelining the very communities the model is intended to empower. Ensuring transparency, accountability, and inclusive representation will be critical safeguards in this process.

7. Conclusion

This policy brief has highlighted the critical shortcomings of the current residential schooling model for tribal children. In contrast, decentralisation through Panchayat-managed schools presents a compelling and viable alternative. The transformative potential of local democratic institutions in advancing community development has been well documented, and it is time to harness this capacity within the education sector.

To achieve this, our existing school system must be complemented by Panchayat-run institutions that enable grassroots governance bodies to realize their full potential. The proposed Panchayat School model aligns with constitutional provisions and longstanding policy commitments to community participation in education. It envisions a system rooted in local culture, responsive to community needs, and inclusive in its approach.

However, successful implementation will depend on striking the right balance between localisation and broader state and central government support. Uniform minimum standards must be maintained to avoid disparities, while adequate resources, training, and institutional backing are essential to empower Panchayats for effective school management.

With the right framework and support systems in place, Panchayat Schools can mark a significant step forward—offering a more inclusive, equitable, and community-driven model of education for tribal children and beyond.

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