

Tribal Youth, Public Sphere and Higher Education in Tripura

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Abstract

This paper deals with the crisis of higher education in general and Tripura in particular. It seeks to raise the debate from mere economic analysis of the crisis ailing the higher education to the socio-cultural aspects of the crisis. Institutions of higher education are ideally poised to nurture public sphere in the educational space. Our constitution makers realised that the marginalised group of society needs to be adequately represented in HEIs, as this representation beside other benefits would also provide them a platform to air their views, opinion and interest in the discourses taking place in public sphere which play a pivotal role in shaping the contours of public policy. This paper attempts to provide a critical and reflexive glance at the participation of tribal youth in current mainstream higher educational institutions (HEIs) in general and Tripura in particular. Through data procured from secondary sources, researcher seeks to establish that through various means of social closure in the institutions of higher education, the representation and participation of tribal youth is far from the constitutional mandate. The hidden curriculum and banking pedagogy further aid and facilitate the process of marginalisation of tribal youth. This lack of representation of tribal youth significantly undermines their participation in public sphere of HEIs, which eventually plays an important role in shaping the contours of public policy.

INTRODUCTION

Public sphere is discursive and liberal realm in which diverse views are contested and public opinion is formed. In this dialogic space, open

conversation is promoted and rational critical discourse is encouraged. In this space, participants are treated equally irrespective of the caste, tribe or religion. In a democratic society, taking

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cognizance of and being sensitive to such public opinion is *sine qua non* for guiding the state's decision making and policies. Through public sphere, society and the state come into contact. In a third world democratic nation like India where there are miniscule politically aware 'public' the importance of HEIs as 'public' good and as nursery of public sphere acquires further importance. Therefore, it is very important that in these democratic public spheres diverse section of society gets equal chance to voice their interest and views.

In Tripura, there are 19 major tribes and are considered to be the original inhabitant of this state. Chronicles of Tripura reveal that historically before the merger of Tripura with the Union of India it was ruled by the tribal kings and tribal were in majority. Subsequently, after the merger with the Indian union, the demography of Tripura has changed significantly. Tribals from being a majority have been reduced to minority (Bhattacharyya, 1988) and constitute 31.8 per cent of total population of Tripura as per 2011 census. Given this geo-political scenario and the changing demography, it becomes all the more important that the voice of tribal youth be heard in the discourses in public sphere of HEIs which eventually goes into policy formulation at the provincial and national level.

Public sphere in the work of Jürgen Habermas has been conceived as 'a social space for the rational-critical debate about public issues conducted by private persons willing

to let arguments and not statuses determine decisions' (Calhoun, 1992). So, for weaving the arguments in this paper, public sphere's central category – 'rational-critical discourse' and as a 'space of reasoned debate' is taken. Conceived in this sense, public sphere acquires immense importance in lending voice to all sections of society. Viewed from this vantage point, HEIs stands closest to the spirit of public sphere and they are ideally poised to nurture and sustain the public sphere.

Education is essentially conceived as 'public' in nature given everyone's stake in it. Academic values and culture are umbilically connected to the society and are reflective of social structure and contradictions of society in which they are located. As our society is marked by social closure on the lines of caste, ethnicity, gender, etc., so are the practices in HEIs mediated by the process of social closure which limits the participation of people from marginalised section of society. Social closure provides a conceptual tool and 'a general model for the analysis of all forms of domination' (Murphy, 1988). Murphy conceives of social closure as 'process of subordination whereby one group monopolises advantages by closing off opportunities to another group of outsiders beneath it which it defines as inferior and ineligible'. Studies have revealed how institutions of higher education are internally structured and subdivided by processes of social closure on the basis of caste (Kirpal

et al. 1985, Wankhede, 2013), class (Apple, 1982, Nambissan, 2010), gender (Bhog, 2002, Chanana, 2003, Manjrekar, 2013) and tribes (Kumar 1986, Nambissan, 2010, Xaxa 2008).

This paper attempts to provide a critical and reflexive glance at the participation of tribal youth in current mainstream Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) in general and Tripura in particular. In this paper beside *Introduction* which establishes the linkage between public sphere, tribal youth and higher education, is structured in two sections and endeavors to address following issues—Section I, deals with— *Limited participation of Scheduled Tribes: A Case of Shrinking Public Sphere in HEIs*, in this section through facts, researcher seeks to establish that the representation and participation of tribal youth is far from the constitutional mandate. This lack of representation of tribal youth significantly undermines their participation in public sphere of HEIs which plays an important role in shaping the contours of public policy.

In Section—II *Curriculum, Pedagogy and the culture of social closure in HEIs*, reflects on the practice of curriculum and pedagogy in institutions of higher education, research tend to reflect on the culture prevalent in institutions of higher education which further undermines the

participation of limited tribal youths in the institutions of higher education. The culture of silence promoted through multifarious means prevents tribal youth in articulating and expressing their voices in the public sphere.

SECTION I

Limited participation of Scheduled Tribes: A Case of Shrinking Public Sphere in HEIs

This section seeks to establish through facts that the representation and participation of tribal youth is far from the constitutional mandate. This lack of representation of tribal youth significantly undermines their participation in public sphere of HEIs. Lack of participation of tribal youth undermines their role in shaping the contours of public policy.

According to the Census 2011 data, Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute 8.6 per cent (104,281,034) of the total population (1,210,193,422) of India. In Tripura the situation is different; tribal (STs) constitute 31.8 per cent (1,166,813) of the total population (3,673,917) of Tripura. Further, it is important to look into STs population in the age group of (18–23 years), which is the age group to enter higher education.

Table 1
Population (18–23 Years) 2013–14

All India/State	Total Population	ST Population	Percentage of ST
All India	140801526	11926495	8.47 %
Tripura	444191	144713	32.57 %

According to the all India survey of higher education (AISHE 2013–14) in the aforementioned Table 1, Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the age group of 18–23 years constitute 8.47 % (11,926,495) of the total 18–23 years age group population (1,40,801,526) of India. In Tripura, tribal (STs) in the age group of 18–23 years constitute 32.57 per cent (1,44,713) out of the total 18–23 years age group population (4,441,91) of Tripura. Ideally, Constitution of India mandates adequate representation of STs in proportion to their population in higher educational institutions. But, in reality there is a yawning gap between what the constitution promises and mandates and what is actually delivered. The situation is glaring when we look at the enrolment of tribal youths in various Universities.

are prompt in implementing the constitutional mandate of providing adequate representation to the ST category. It is generally believed that state governed public institutions are underrepresented because of maladministration. But, a quick glance at the representation of STs in these institutions would reveal the yawning gap between the policy and the practice of affirmative action. As per aforementioned Table 2, in the Central Universities the STs constitutes merely 3.9 per cent of total students enrolled. In the institutes of national importance governed by the central government, the STs constitute 6.1 per cent of total students enrolled and in the state public University the enrolment of STs is abysmally low at 2.8 per cent. As per the Central Educational Institutions

Table 2
Category wise Enrolment in various types of Universities—
All India level

Type of University	Total Students	ST Students	Percentage of ST
Central University	655717	25885	3.9 %
Institute of National Importance	150849	9316	6.1 %
State Public University	2688340	76364	2.8 %

(AISHE 2013–2014: T-85)

Table3
Enrolment in Higher Education— Case of Tripura

State	Total Enrolment	ST Enrolment	Percentage of ST
Tripura	68262	12048	17.6 %

AISHE (2013–2014: T-49)

In academia, there is an illusion that Central Universities and institutes of national importance governed by the central government

(Reservation in Admission) Act, 2006, reservation has been provided in following proportion— SC – 15 per cent , ST – 7.5 per cent, OBC – 27 per cent

(Laskar, 2010). In all the aforesaid scenario's mentioned in Table 2, the enrollment of STs is much below the constitutional mandate of 7.5 per cent enrolment of STs. However, the demography of North East India is different as majority of the states in the North East region have tribal population. Therefore, the government allows Central Universities and other Central educational institutions, most of which are located in the North East to continue with 15 per cent reservation for STs even though the Central Education Institutions Act stipulates 7.5 per cent reservation for them¹.

This paper is concerned with the representation of tribal youth in the public sphere of higher educational institutions in Tripura. The aforementioned Table 3 reveals the representation of STs in the higher educational institutions of Tripura. Simultaneously, these tribal dominated states in North East region have made special provisions for adequate representation of tribal

in the higher educational institutions of state. In case of Tripura, as per the *Tripura Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Reservation Act, 1991*, there is a provision of thirty-one (31) per cent reservation for the Scheduled Tribes in admission of students to educational institutions². It is noteworthy that the tribal (STs) constitute 31.8 per cent (1,166,813) of the total population (3,673,917) of Tripura. The STs population in the age group of (18–23 Years) is 32.57 per cent in Tripura. But, if we look at the enrolment of tribals in various higher educational institutions in Tripura, the condition is dismal and far from the constitutional mandate of 31 per cent. As revealed in Table 3, tribals have merely 17.6 per cent of the total enrolment of students in higher educational institutions in Tripura. This representation is further low for ST students facing multiple challenges—ethnic and physically challenged as represented in the following table.

Table 4
Category wise distribution of PWD students All India level

Category per hundred	% out of Total PWD Male	% out of Total PWD Female	% out of Total PWD
SC	8.6	9.2	8.8
ST	2.6	2.4	2.5
OBC	28.8	30.4	29.4

(AISHE 2013–14:19)

Table 5
State wise enrolment in PWD community

State	Persons with Disability		
	Male	Female	Total
Tripura	93	29	122

(AISHE 2013–14: T-50)

It is amply revealed that the representation of STs in higher education is much less than the constitutional mandate at national level. The conditions of persons with disability in ST category facing multiple deprivations is even worse, according to the all India survey of higher education as represented in aforementioned Table 4, PWD students of ST category constitute merely 2.5 per cent of the overall population in 18–23 years age group of PWD category. In case of Tripura the numerical strength of PWD students in higher educational institutions

is 122 out of which male—93 and female—29. It is clearly evident that the representation of tribal youth in HEIs is much below their numerical strength and also less than the constitutional mandate country wide in general and Tripura in particular. Further, ST students with multiple deprivations like disability are all the more represented inadequately.

The representation of STs in the higher educational institutions is further conditioned by the type of region—urban or rural. The following diagram (Figure 1) gives a glimpse of the scenario.

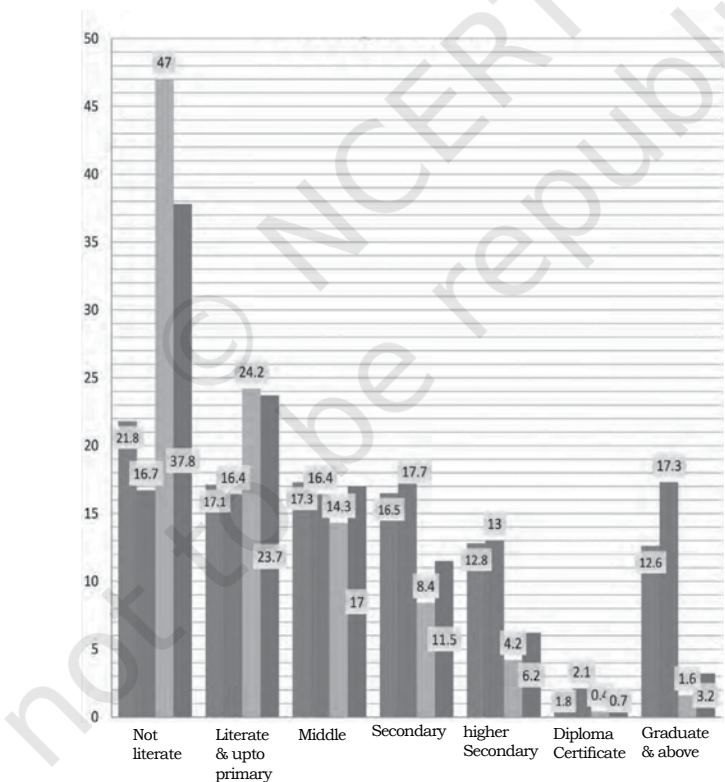


Figure 1: Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India
Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Statistics Division, Government of India 2013: 23

The statistical profile of STs reveal that hardly 1.6 per cent of STs in rural areas are graduate and above. Further, only 0.4 per cent of STs in rural areas are diploma holders. These statistics reveal that with the multiplication of regional deprivation with STs the representation of STs in higher education further drops to a newer low. The situation of representation of tribal youth is further clear when we look at their enrolment in various programmes across the country.

In the aforesaid Table 6, it is clear that the representation of ST students in higher educational programmes ranges from virtually being nil to 6.5 per cent but it is far from the constitutional mandate of 7.5 per cent representation. It is not surprising to see that even in the minimal representation it is predominantly in the arts discipline. In specialised medical field like Master of Chirurgiae (M.Ch.), the STs are nowhere to be found. In the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), STs are as low

Table 6
Programme wise enrolment of Schedule Tribe students— All India level
(based on actual response)

Programme	All Categories	Scheduled Tribe	Percentage of STs
Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy)	104511	3815	0.3%
M.Ch. (Master of Chirurgiae)	326	0	0%
M.Phil. (Master of Philosophy)	31380	1181	3.7%
M.A. (Master of Arts)	787063	84240	6.1%
M.Sc. (Master of Science)	546978	16531	3.0%
M.B.A. (Master of Business Administration)	194338	7987	1.4%
M.C.A. (Master of Computer Applications)	244554	2816	1.1%
M.Tech. (Master of Technology)	178325	4550	2.5%
M.D. (Doctor of Medicine)	30462	910	2.9%
B.A. (Bachelor of Arts)	8597730	564951	6.5%
B.Sc. (Bachelor of Science)	3183423	130109	4.0%
B.E. (Bachelor of Engineering)	1896153	36564	1.9%
B.Com. (Bachelor of Commerce)	3261644	96303	2.9%
L.L.B. (Bachelor of Law or Laws)	223973	6423	2.8%

(AISHE 2013–2014: T-28–29)

as 0.3 per cent. It is clear that when STs are even less than 1 per cent at Ph.D. level, they will definitely be underrepresented at the faculty level in all streams in higher education because Ph.D. is a desirable and very soon going to be an essential criteria for faculty recruitment. In Master of Computer Applications, STs are 1.1 per cent, in Master of Business Administration they constitute 1.4 per cent, in Bachelor of Engineering they constitute 1.9 per cent, in Master of Technology STs constitute 2.5 per cent, in Bachelor of Law STs constitute 2.8 per cent, in Doctor of medicine STs constitute 2.9 per cent, in Bachelor of Commerce STs constitute 2.9 per cent, in Master of Science STs constitute 3 per cent, in Bachelor of Arts STs constitute

in Tripura in these programmes is no different and experiences similar minimal representation of tribals in these technical disciplines.

Teachers play an important role in nurturing and fostering students. There is no denying the fact that ethnic affinity plays an important role in motivating students of that particular community. But in case of tribal population, we find a grim scenario as teachers from tribal community is very less as revealed in the following pie-diagram.

Further, constitution mandates 7.5 per cent representation of STs in higher educational institutions. But, the AISHE 2013–14 data reveals in aforementioned Figure 2 that ST teachers are as low as 2 per cent in the institutions of higher education. This

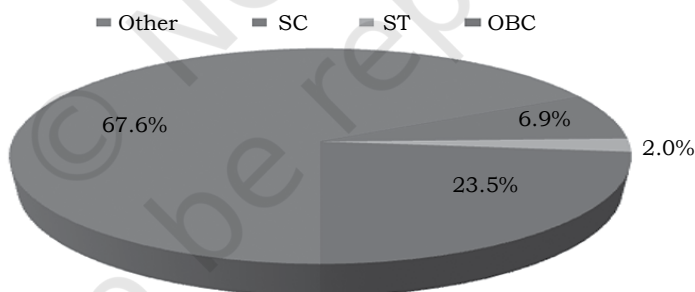


Figure 2: Social Category wise distribution of Teaching Staff at All India level (AISHE 2013–14: 26)

6.5 per cent and at Mater of Arts STs constitute 6.1 per cent. The facts speak in volume about the institutional blackout of STs across almost all the programmes and specifically from the science and engineering field. The condition of tribal representation

significantly diminishes STs voice in articulating their voice for promoting their interest. The following Table 7, reveals the category wise number of teachers in various types of institution of higher education.

Table 7
Category wise number of teachers in various types of Universities—
All India level

Type of University	Total Teachers	ST Teachers	Percentage of ST
Central University	11040	233	2.1 %
Institute of National Importance	12282	25	0.2 %
State Public University	53216	253	0.4 %

(AISHE 2013-2014: T-89)

Table 8
Category wise teachers in Higher Education— the Case of Tripura

State	Total Teachers	ST Teachers	Percentage of ST
Tripura	2293	238	10.3 %

(AISHE 2013-2014: T-68)

As reflected in the aforementioned Table 7, in Central Universities the representation of STs is as low as 2.1 per cent, in institutions of national importance it is 0.2 per cent and in state public Universities STs representation is 0.4 per cent. With this abysmal representation, in the institutions of higher education irrespective of jurisdiction whether it is provincial government or central government the interest and demands of STs do not find their voice in the public sphere in institutions of higher education.

Further, the status of STs in Tripura is not different; it is discussed in Table 8. In Tripura, STs comprises of 31.8 per cent of total population and as per the *Tripura Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Reservation Act, 1991*, there is a provision of 31 per cent reservation for the Scheduled Tribes in educational institutions. But, STs representation

in teaching faculty of higher educational institutions of Tripura is 10.3 per cent which is much less than the legislative mandate. Education plays an important role for the marginalised section of society as it provides an effective avenue for empowerment and mobility. Through the discourse and deliberations in public sphere tribes are not only able to bring their existential and experiential issues in the centre stage for discussion but also they contribute by suggesting viable solutions for those problems.

This under representation seriously undermines STs voice in the articulation of their interest in public sphere of higher educational institutions. Since, higher educational institutions are the spaces where policies are discussed, feedback articulated and newer policy framework proposed, the overall implication of under representation of STs in the public sphere of higher educational institutions is that

STs interest are not adequately represented in the policy formulation which is sine quo non in a democratic society. Such under representation of STs is conspicuous in various programmes across the discipline. When the existential and experiential aspects of STs are not adequately represented in the policy framework discontentment brews, such discontentment offers challenge to democratic fabric of society in form of separatism, insurgency and other modes of protest and violence.

Section II

Curriculum, Pedagogy and the Culture of Social Closure in HEIs

The aforesaid section highlighted the numerical under-representation of tribal youth in the institutions of higher education. This section focuses on the culture prevalent in institutions of higher education of India in general and Tripura in particular which further undermines the participation of limited tribal students in the institutions of higher education. The culture of silence promoted through multifarious means prevents tribal youth in articulating and expressing their voices in the public sphere.

It is pertinent that the tribal students need to bring their issues in the discourses taking place in the public sphere of HEIs. Because as, Xaxa would argue, 'The structure specific to tribal society gives rise to certain disadvantages' (Xaxa, 2008) and these

disadvantages can be envisioned and bring out more effectively by the tribal themselves in the public sphere and possibly explore or suggest viable solution in tune with the lived experiences of the tribal students.

But, it is noticed that tribal youth are not adequately represented in the HEIs. An interesting explanation can be found in Bourdieu's analysis. Bourdieu (1997) resurrected the concept of capital and outlined its three forms: Cultural capital, Social capital, and Economic capital. It illuminates some of the reasons where tribal students are at disadvantage in the educational institutions. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital can be in three forms—embodied state, objectified state and institutionalised state. The embodied state in the form of long-lasting dispositions of mind and body, so in case of tribal youth it can be effectively communicated by tribal themselves. In case of objectified state of cultural capital: in the form of cultural goods like books, etc. Further, institutionalised state of cultural capital reflected in form of educational qualifications also puts tribal youth at disadvantage. Tribals are also at disadvantage in case of social capital as well, according to Bourdieu 'The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilise and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his

own right by each of those to whom he is connected.’ (Bourdieu, 1997). Therefore, in terms of cultivating network of social relationship tribals lags behind. This put them in marginal roles in the higher educational premises.

Another factor which plays a key role in dis(empowering) students is the curriculum. Curriculum in these HEIs are remote to the lived experience of tribal community thereby fail to inspire the tribal youth for meaningful participation the public sphere of HEIs. Kumar writes that, ‘Textbooks are universally used but they do not mean the same thing in different countries. Their practical use in the school’s daily routine and their symbolic function vary from one educational system to the next’ (Kumar, 1986). Similarly, the practice of pedagogy is remote to the life of tribals. ‘Pedagogical writings typically assume that textbooks have a universally accepted function. Not just pedagogical writings, even educational planning exercise are often based on the assumption than text books are a value-free, globally relevant in-put’ (Kumar, 1986). Echoing the same concern Geetha Nambissan argues that, ‘Curricular and pedagogic are concern in the NCF. However, they fail to be adequately informed by an understanding of the specific context of educational deprivation, particularly where the economically and socially vulnerable communities such as dalits and adivasis are concerned. For instance,

it is important to recognise that these communities were historically deprived of education because of the position of dalits as untouchables in the caste system and the isolation, exploitation and stereotypes of ‘cultural backwardness’ of adivasis. These factors may continue to be relevant to the educational experiences of these communities today has largely been ignored.’ (Geetha Nambissan, 2012). The marginalisation of tribal students is further aggravated with the practice of discrimination. Discrimination and humiliation lowers the self esteem of tribal students. The Thorat committee (2007) in its empirical investigation outlined the ways in which SC/ST community students at undergraduate and post graduation levels face discrimination (Thorat, 2013). These hurdles discourage the already miniscule tribal students to participate meaningfully in public sphere of HEIs where there is possibility to express and articulate the tribal demands peacefully.

In a comprehensive analysis of tribal students’ participation and representation in the public sphere of HEIs, I have already outlined their miniscule presence in terms of quantity as tribals are far below the constitutional mandate. The nature of curriculum and pedagogy practiced in HEIs instead of equipping tribals for a meaningful participation in the public sphere of HEIs creates resistance and strengthens inertia for any meaningful participation by the tribals. Beside the

curriculum and pedagogy, the speech pattern used in the educational premises further restricts meaningful participation of tribals in the public sphere. *Basil Bernstein* outlining this issue writes, that there are mainly two forms of speech pattern—‘elaborated code’ and the ‘restricted code,’ in general the members of the working class and other marginalised groups of society are limited to the use of restricted codes where as members of the middle class and upper class whose culture is reflected and practiced in the educational institutions use both restricted and elaborate codes (Bernstine, 1973). Such barriers prevent tribal students from effective articulation and expression of their views in the arena of public sphere.

If we look at the present educational scenario in HEIs in Tripura, the dialogic spirit essential for participating in public sphere is largely absent from the pedagogy and curriculum. ‘Critical pedagogy is rooted into the belief that education is fundamental to democracy and that no democratic society can survive without a formative culture shaped by pedagogical practices capable of creating the conditions for producing citizens who are critical, self-reflexive, knowledgeable, and willing to make moral judgment and act in socially responsible way’ (Giroux, 2011). In absence of such critical pedagogy, tribal students don’t find academic milieu intellectually stimulating. Academic environment fails to inspire

critical consciousness in tribal youth of Tripura in particular and India in general.

This absence of critical consciousness in tribal youth of Tripura is partly due to the practice of, as Paulo Freire would say— ‘banking education’. Freire further explains that implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between man and the world: man is merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or with others; man is spectator, not re-creator. In this view, man is not a conscious being; he is rather the possessor of a consciousness; an empty mind passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the outside world (1970). Such a conception of education robs tribal students of their agency to create and transform.

Instead Freire, proposes, problem-posing, liberating education. Where teacher-of-the-student and student-of-the-teacher ceases to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teacher (1970). Such a dialogic education has liberating potential and is in tune with the democratic ethos. Freire saw students as vibrant and dynamic citizens who must constantly challenge the status quo and all forms of oppressions. But unfortunately the dialogic spirit, essential for participating in public sphere is absent from the curriculum and pedagogy of HEIs. As a result, knowledge as it is taught has been divorced from the structure of community.

CONCLUSION

There is a clamoring call to consider higher education as a democratic public sphere geared towards inspiring students to come to terms with awareness about their own sense of power and public voice as individual and social agents by enabling them to articulate and voice their lived experience in the discourses shaping the policy formulations. But due to miniscule representation of tribal youth in India in general and Tripura in particular, the tribal youth lacks the critical mass for their voice to be noticed in the discourses taking

place in the public sphere of HEIs. Further, the dominant education system practiced in HEIs of Tripura follows the non-tribal pedagogy and also leans on curriculum centered on non-tribal lived experiences. Thus, the tribal culture becomes a problem to be adjusted in the mainstream education. Viewed from such centrist perspective the tribal culture is considered alien and strange rather than being considered as rich and unique. As a result, there is systematic 'epistemic exclusion' of tribal issues from the curriculum and enquiry itself which is detrimental for tribal community.

END NOTES

- ¹ The government has cleared amendments to Central Education Institutions (reservations in admission) Act, 2006 that allows certain central educational institutions to give higher reservation to SC and ST students than what is stipulated under law. For further details refer: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/education/more-seats-for-sc-st-students-at-central-universities/articleshow/6060923.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst. Last visited on 23.09.2019.
- ² For further details refer: The Tripura Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Reservation Act, 1991 Available at https://twd.tripura.gov.in/sites/default/files/Reservation_Act_1991.pdf, Last visited on 23.09.2019.

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