

Education, Cultural Identity and Modernity – Pieces of Evidence from Birhor Community of West Bengal

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Abstract: Educational provisions for tribal communities are rooted in Constitutional provisions and mandates the state to provide quality education with special care. However, poor academic attainment has been a customary trend for the tribal communities. Dismal performance of tribal children in formal education, their high attrition rates has been documented and researched. The paper does not aim to state, analyse and/or compare the outcome and effectiveness of government initiatives across region or overtime. However a trivial shift in the manner ‘education’ as viewed by development planners, will depict a different image. The research plans to demonstrate that integration of cultural transmission with learning experience serve as a trajectory to modernity for an otherwise backward ethnic group.

Keywords: Education, Ethnic Identity, Capability Approach

1. Introduction

Tribes are ethnic entities with uniqueness in all facets of their life and living. While the ethnicity factor bonds the community with their cultural ethos and traditions simultaneously it draws a virtual barrier with the general mass beyond their own domain, limiting the scope for social mobility. Their mind set, perceptions still vary with the larger social order.

The mainstream education system rarely considers cultural backgrounds of learners as determinants of academic outcome. Surprisingly ‘education’ has been causing cultural disconnection. The complete neglect of ‘culture in practice’ flesh out a discursive identity for the children which infringe upon the socio-cultural praxis of the community. Transmission of values and traditional knowledge across generations or broadly, cultural continuity is visibly being disrupted given the normative structure of their economy. Its needless to mention that ‘modernity’ and ‘education’ are intertwined facets of development. The influences of modernity which have been flowing through the community owing to the existing education system is hardly blending up with their age-old tradition. Any attempt to conceptualise ‘modernity’ for the tribal community poses an apparent contradiction. Neither can those be utterly disregarded keeping in view the ensnaring market economy. Among indigenous minorities modernity shapes up itself in typical paradoxical ways.

The purpose of the study is to examine critically the perception and contribution of education in the cultural identity of the Bihors, a small group of hunter-gathers in West Bengal, India. Can modernity be interpreted differently for tribe communities, expressing the concept in line with their unique

cultural identity? How does education contribute? Does education pass over cultural continuity and/or collective identity?

Poor academic attainment has been a customary trend for the tribal community. Dismal performance of tribal children in formal education, their high attrition rates has been documented and researched. The paper does not aim to state, analyse and/or compare the outcome and effectiveness of government initiatives across region or overtime. However a trivial shift in the manner ‘education’ as viewed by development planners, will depict a different image. The research plans to demonstrate that integration of cultural transmission with learning experience serve as a trajectory to modernity for an otherwise backward ethnic group.

2. The context

Tribal identity has been a contentious subject which has been often homogenised across communities. ‘Identity politics’ have been elaborated by sociologists as politics centring the struggle for ‘preservation of identity’ which have been common among the hill tribes of North Eastern parts of India. However a different flavour of politics sphere up *within the community* which alter the socio economic dynamics smoothly. In fact education, in the guise of modernity catalyses the process. Crude politics mask the cultural identity of the people as the emblem of ‘modernity’. Their silent adaptation to such foreign interplay of power spawns radical change in social relations, fanning the ever-persisting inequalities and backwardness.

The concept of ‘identity’

Ethnic identity is a multifaceted concept that provides a psychosocial framework for an individual to recognize and define on eself comprehensibly given the broader social context(Taylor and Bamaca 2004). Identity development is crucial in the early ages which delineates the basis for expression and manifestation of social self all throughout an individual’s life (Josselson, 2017, Phinney 1996). It gets recurrently refined and “there is something active about identity that cannot be ignored: it isn’t ‘just there’, its not a ‘thing’, it must always be established” (Haukamau and Sibley 2010). Individuals belong to various groups due to varying contexts which generally have purposeful basis, for example due to gender, religion, ethnicity etc. In this regard, identity is a “product of relationships with other people and within social groups” (Haukamau and Sibley 2010)

Social identity states “... that individuals attribute value to the group in which they are members and derive their self esteem from their feelings of membership within that group” (Phinney 2013). Individuals often attribute value to their association with a group which in turn provide positive self esteem. On the contrary, groups, particularly minority groups which are discriminated and/or have low social status generate negative social identity (Phinney, 1996). The members either accept and internalize the adverse views of the outer society or reject those to develop their own identity (Phinney 2013). Social identities collectively constitute social selves, thereby linking the individual with the outer world and identifying his/her position within a broader social setting (Haukamau and Sibley 2010)

Ethnic identity is conditioned by social contexts and is viewed as “ the fundamental aspect of the self that includes a sense of membership in an ethnic group and the attitudes and feelings associated with that membership” (Phinney, 1996). An ethnic group represents a group of people who uphold a subjective trust and acceptance in their common ancestry and collective tradition and who share certain cultural traits such as dress, art, music, food, literature, and language (Taylor and Bamaca 2004). Ethnicity enables a simple and effective categorization for tribes at their community level vis-à-vis their

social milieu. They distinguish themselves with respect to their perception and therefore interaction in their daily life with varied social contexts that they come across. Phinney 1996 mentioned that the sense of self gets developed over time through awareness of their relation with the outer society, their acceptance in various social contexts and how they negotiate with these, people, social institutions and different cultures.

3. Objectives of the study

Inequality exists both in opportunities and outcome of the existing education system for the tribal community. Mere analysis of the hindrances and the enablers to education for the community will not reveal the root of the problem. A typical social dynamics operate both with respect to availing the opportunities and the impact of education keeping in view their typical traditional and cultural traits. The purpose of the paper is to explore and link the twin objectives, (a) heterogeneity in tribal identity as a misperception of education and (b) redefining education as a dire essential for 'development as modernity'. For better living the tribal people are aware of the significance of education but their abilities are constrained and conditioned by local geographical factors which again remain closely entwined with their socio economic behaviour, the line of causality remains hard to be singled out.

4. Material and Method

Existing literature on ethnic identity discuss about the positive association of identity with psychological well-being (Phinney 2013, Josselson 2019, Haukamau and Sibley 2010) and enhancing ability for coping with discrimination (Haukamau and Sibley 2010). However measurement and conceptualization of ethnic identity remains crucial for all such findings (Phinney 2013). Majority of the research on conceptualizing ethnic identity centers around Tajfel's social identity theory and Erikson's theory of identity formation (Phinney 2013).

Social identity theory focusses on the concept of "the group in the individual" and states that 'belongingness' to a social group shape up 'self-concept' among an individual (Treppe and Loy 2017)

Alternatively Erikson's (1968) theory conceptualizes identity as a process and emphasizes the elements of the formation process. Exploration and commitment to a specific identity domain builds up self-concept and therefore self-identity According to Treppe and Loy 2017 the social identity theory emphasizes on the various components of identity and their effective outcome, while Erikson's theory reveals identity development as process of exploration and commitment of one self to a group or community. As such, it is critical to develop valid and reliable methods with which to measure this construct.

This article attempts to conceptualize ethnic identity and thereafter examine the interface of mainstream education and cultural identity of ethnic communities. For this purpose following Houkamau and Sibley 2010a multidimensional model of tribal identity has been conceptualized to represent the cultural and social aspects and/or heterogeneity of tribal identity.

Item development and content for ethnic identity of the Birhor community

Phinney (2013) has defined ethnic identity from a psychosocial perspective, as 'a dynamic, multidimensional construct that refers to one's identity of self as a member of an ethnic group' (p. 63). The author stressed the importance of cultural background and/or perception of attachment with an ethnic group which influences lives and living irrespective of actual involvement with the community.

The Birhors are an isolated community with approximately 130 families spread across three blocks in Purulia, West Bengal. A typical social boundary separates them from the mainstream population. Severe malnutrition, high drop out from high school education, low income – their life and living depicts acute backwardness in every respect. This research tries to explore and conceptualize the ethnic identity aspect of the community given their social isolation in an otherwise ensnaring market economy. Being traditionally forest dwellers, the people still enjoy an inherent bond with the local forest, rather the local ecology.

Their typical isolation from the mainstream society vis-a-vis earnest government planning initiatives for their betterment is supposed to create a perplexity which would slowly and silently undermine their ethnicity which had been the basis of their age-old social solidarity.

Here an attempt has been made to conceptualise Birhor identity following Houkamau and Sibley 2010. The authors have perceived “identity” as an overarching concept describing his “comprehension of him or herself as both an object and an actor in the social world”. In the social or the outer world with varied social groups, identity positions the social entity of an individual vis-a-vis the larger society with contrasting uniqueness. Therefore ‘identity’ can be represented in a interconnected network of self-experience, self-conceptions and self-images all of which together define himself as a representative of the society in varied contexts.

Following Haukauma and Sibley 2010, for the Birhor community 20 items consisting of Birhor identity and culture were identified which were discussed and thoroughly reviewed in informal group discussions among the community. Later those were included in the questionnaire. Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 for strongly disagree, 3 for neutral to 5 for strongly agree.

Components of Ethnic Identity:

- Sense of belongingness:

1. My self-respect to be a Birhor is important.
2. I love the fact that I am a Birhor.
3. My ancestry is important to me.
4. I enjoy following Birhor culture
5. I feel proud that I am a Birhor and different from other people.
6. Being Birhor is important to who I am as a person
7. Being Birhor is important to my sense of what kind of person I am

- Concept of Interconnectedness:

8. I consider myself to be interconnected with my tribe.
9. My Birhor identity is fundamentally about my relationships with other Birhor people
10. Reciprocity is at the heart of what it means to be Birhor for me.

- Religious beliefs

11. I believe in Birhor religious practices.

12. Birhor spiritual traditions are important to me.
13. I feel a spiritual connection with my ancestors
14. I feel a stronger spiritual association with my friends and other people of my community
 - Cultural knowledge (Knowledge of their own rituals and practices, songs, dances etc.)
15. I am aware of all the rituals, songs, dances of the Birhor community.
16. I have a clear sense of my Birhor heritage and how important it is to me.
17. I can perform dances, songs of Birhor tradition.
 - Features of Authenticity (Awareness of the traits of their own tribe):
18. I can identify a true Birhor from other tribes just by looking at them.
19. True Bihors always perform certain rituals while meeting other Bihors
20. Bihors have specific hunting techniques and perceptions of forest.

According to Harriss-White 2005, identity of individuals have a profound influence on the outcome of any economic transactions in India. The interdependencies between the state, market and the community, particularly for ethnic groups vary, producing diverse outcomes based on the interactions with the 'identity' of the agents. Therefore, for a PVTG like the Bihors, the heterogeneity in their identity have wide practical implications mainly for planning and development initiatives of the government given the acute backwardness of the community. After construction of the identity concept of the tribal respondents an attempt has been made to explain the heterogeneity in their identity with respect to educational attainment. Furthermore, the role of education in development of the community has been elucidated as improvement in the 'capability' set of the respondent as his enhanced ability for displaying 'informed and reasoned choice'.

5. The theoretical perspective

Education for the tribal community need to be evaluated by a normative framework that will take care of the diverse cultural sensitiveness of the people. The Capability Approach defines well being in terms of 'entitlements' and 'capabilities'. Sen (1999) proposed to shift the attention from quantifying development by measuring "...the amount of the means of well being that people have....." or "...quantification of the means of that achievement..." to "....actual achievements themselves...". The important elements of Sen's Capability Approach are 'functionings' and 'capabilities'. The 'beings' and 'doings' of an individual are coined as his functionings. According to Padmanabhan (2011), functionings include being literate, being healthy, being respected that is the functions achieved by an individual which comprises his wellbeing. Individuals achieve functionings by converting his entitlements. In this regard Sen (1999) emphasized upon two important aspects related to the resources and endowment - the 'conversion factors' and 'choices' that would facilitate 'achievement of desires'.

Within the Capability Approach, development has been conceived as a process that enables the expansion of the opportunities or opportunity set of individuals. Sen 1999 has defined an individual's capability as the set of available functioning n-tuples from which he/she can choose. Along

with the vectors of functionings the capability set also includes the freedom of the individual to choose from amongst the available alternatives and opportunities. Sen considered freedom of choice of an individual as an important determinant of his well being and therefore has been a component in the capability set along with the available options and opportunities.

Therefore welfare measured through achieved functionings or chosen outcome differ from welfare attained from the opportunities available (Padmanabhan 2011). Sen mentioned about the variation in the degree of conversion from characteristics to functionings. Given the same set of inputs there exists diversity among individuals with respect to their wellbeing achieved. He highlighted the impact of social factors that lead to differences in individual's ability to convert vector of characteristics or capability inputs into capabilities. In his approach "...development is seen in terms of ends rather than means.." (Sen 1999).

Within the theoretical framework of the Capability Approach, the wellbeing of the tribal community can be perceived as their ability to demonstrate freedom of choice across an expanded capability set. Its not mere income or income security, rather ability to generate income within their limited sociocultural context. For the Birhor community, capability to display 'informed choice' and/or 'informed and reasoned choice' may be considered as 'wellbeing' and/or 'modernity' for the community.

The tribal communities have an inherent preference for livestock which they consider as a crucial component of their living. The stock of animals whatever the number and composition may be, provide a sense of security to the families to tide over sudden emergencies and crisis. Also crudely, those represent a typical 'savings' for the families also.

The tribal community has been observed to have a varying aptitude to generate income from their livestock. Almost all of the families rear animals basically as an emergency source of money in any crisis, but they hardly get sizeable income from the livestock. Generally they sell the animals in crisis either to their neighbouring families or to local middlemen and get a much lesser price in either of the situations. Only families who are better informed with respect to market price and buyer of the animals are able to get a sizeable income. Therefore 'ability to generate income from livestock regularly' has been considered as a variable representing 'informed choice' of the respondents, that is the number of times in the past two years the family got income from their livestock under normal condition and not in crisis.

Similarly, when that livestock income has been saved in their bank account then that is considered as an 'informed and reasoned choice'. Those families have the perception of their 'future' and therefore consider saving as necessary for better living. The number of times a family deposited money in their savings account will display their reasoned and informed choice pattern. Education is supposed to enable informed and reasoned choice when it interacts with the self-identity components of the tribal community. Indigeneous communities are supposed to have comparative advantage in the larger society with respect to their ethnic consciousness. This will be validated by the multiple regression analysis. For this purpose two other factors have been considered as controlling variables, agricultural proficiency and dependency on forest.

The Bihors generally lack adequate knowledge about agriculture. In spite of that they learn from the neighbouring communities and practice farming in however odd way it may be. Few of the families display their expertise acquired through keen observation and information. But majority lack that

eagerness, generally they feel contented with the winter paddy that they harvest from their land however meagre the amount may be. Being assured about their incapacibilities, poor quality of land, almost no possibility of irrigation, their lack of investment ability for better farming, they remain unperturbed. Respondents who are satisfied with their crop harvest for the past three consecutive agricultural seasons are expected to display proficiency in agriculture. The dummy variable will be assigned a value of '1' for them and '0' for others.

Majority of the families earn either by selling ropes made from Chirhor Lata in their traditional way and/or by exchanging any product like residue twigs and branches of trees as fuel, wild mushrooms, honey etc. The average amount of money earned by the family in the last six months will represent their 'dependence on forest'.

6. Results and Discussion

Participants

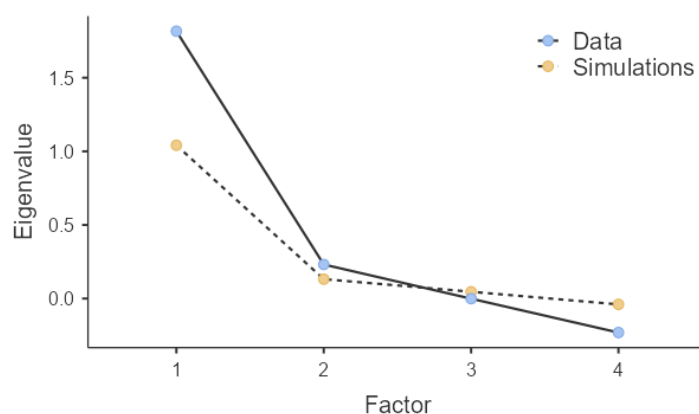
The Birhor community of Bhupati Pally in Bagmudi block of Purulia district was covered in the survey only. The response of rest of the Birhors regarding authentication of their ethnicity seemed so obvious that no variation was observed. Their seclusion may have kept them so firm in their traditions and beliefs that they couldn't perceive any possible deviation.

The survey was conducted over 132 Birhor respondents among whom 109 were male and 23 were females. The females were observed to avoid the survey. Surprisingly they expressed utter shyness in answering questions related to their sense of belongingness to the community. Even such an attitude was observed among aged males also. Therefore no sampling technique could be followed, Birhors within the age-group of 15 years to 50 years who were willing to participate spontaneously were included in the survey, mean = 32.2, standard deviation= 8.76.

Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis was applied using Maximum Likelihood with oblique rotation in order to identify the underlying latent constructs relevant for representation of ethnic identity of a tribe community. In the first step the analysis of the scree plot of the eigen values suggested a two-factor model. Items with factor loading less than 0.30 were systemically removed in various steps while examining the recalculated factor loadings of the remaining items in each step. Finally a two-factor model was obtained which contained eight items.

Fig 1: Scree plot of the observed eigen values



This two-factor model explained 56.9% of the variance. The scree plot is presented in Fig.1. The cut-off, where the slope drastically changes indicates a two-factor solution. The items and the factor loadings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Item content and factor loadings for ethnic identity

Self-identity	Component 1	Component 2
My self-respect to be a Birhor is important.	0.792	0.12
I consider myself to be interconnected with my tribe.	0.831	0.042
I feel proud that I am a Birhor and different from other people.	0.862	0.261
Being Birhor is important to who I am as a person	0.713	0.115
I have a clear sense of my Birhor heritage and how important it is to me.	0.724	0.035
Cultural efficacy		
I believe in Birhor religious practices.	0.054	0.816
I am aware of all the rituals, songs, dances of the Birhor community.	0.075	0.795
I can perform dances, songs and other rituals typical with the Birhor community	0.163	0.763
I believe in Birhor religious practices.	0.215	0.697

Thereafter, the descriptive statistics for the two identity constructs and their correlation with the demographic variables were examined. The result has been presented in Table 2. Both the identity constructs had Cronbach's alphas greater than greater than 0.70. Both the constructs had standard deviation close to 1, indicating variation in the responses in the survey.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and demographic correlates of the components of ethnic identity

		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1.	Age									
2.	Gender (female=0, male=1)	0.02								
3.	Education	-0.24	-0.15							
4.	Generating livestock	-0.16*	0.21	0.23						

	income regularly									
5.	Saving livestock income regularly	0.11	0.02	0.24*	0.14					
6.	Dependence on forest	0.35*	0.14	-0.05*	0.16	-0.34*				
7.	Agricultural proficiency	0.06	0.01	0.12*	0.21	0.27*	0.38			
8.	Self-concept of Birhor identity	.27*	.43*	-0.28	0.07*	0.11	-0.26*	-0.17		
9.	Cultural efficacy	.41*	-0.23*	-0.37	0.37	0.48*	0.34*	0.22	0.21*	
	Mean								2.51	1.63
	Standard Deviation								0.92	1.03
	Skewness								0.52	-1.14
	Kurtosis								-0.23	1.05
	Cronbach's alpha								0.76	0.81

*p< .05

In comparison to females, male had highernotion of self-identity ($r = 0.43$). Age of the respondent has also been relevant for his self-identity and also for cultural efficacy. But education have a significantly negative association with cultural efficacy. There is an association between self-identity as Birhor and the choice of the respondent to generate livestock income. The younger generation is more efficient in generating livestock income than the aged respondents. Cultural efficacy influences his decision to save livestock income. Education also conditions his savings decision. Education has also be significantly associated with cultural efficacy, Age of the respondent has been significant for both the components of self-identity, the perception has been higher for older respondents for both the components. Also women scored comparatively higher for the cultural efficacy component.

Saving attitude from livestock income have been significantly correlated with the cultural efficacy component of self-identity. Strong cultural efficacy enabled the respondent to communicate better with the outer world. This has been validated by the multiple regression analysis result presented below. Also dependency on forest is negatively correlated with the saving attitude.

In an interconnected world with wide prevalence of intermingling and cultural exchange with other tribal and nontribal communities, its crucial to interpret identity as a complex and multi-layered concept. For the regression analysis, along with the controlling variables, education has been included with the two components of ethnic identity as two interaction variables.

Table3: Multiple regression analysis predicting determinants of informed choice and informed and reasoned choice among the tribal community

Variables	Informed choice		Informed and reasoned choice	
	Coefficient	t-value	Coefficient	t-value
Intercept	1.02		0.08	
Age	0.03	0.24	0.51	1.72

Gender (female=0, male=1)	0.11	0.37	-0.21	-1.83
Education	-0.25	-1.47	0.14	1.11
Dependence on forest	0.82	0.06	-0.02	-0.27
Agricultural proficiency	0.03	1.52*	0.13	1.08*
Self-concept of Birhor identity	-0.08	-1.43	-0.38	-1.31
Cultural efficacy	0.01	0.46	-0.03	-0.38
Self-concept *education	0.15	1.73	-0.08	-1.04
Cultural efficacy* education	0.07	1.64	0.47	1.53*

*p< .05, Model predicting informed choice:R2 = 0.48, adj. R2 = 0.41, F= 26.18, p< .01, Model predicting informed and reasoned choice:R2 = 0.37, adj. R2 = 0.28, F= 31.04, p< .01

The regression results demonstrate heterogeneity in tribal identity. Education has been an important determinant in the choice pattern of the tribal community, but when it is associated with the cultural efficacy component of the identity factor. In other words, the ethnic consciousness factor will benefit the community when it gets combined with educational attainment of the tribal respondent. Education will act as the facilitating factor for the community to reap benefits of development provided the ethnicity factor of the community is active. Also, people with better agricultural proficiency are obviously more informed and therefore have better decision and ability to generate and manage livestock income or display informed and reasoned choice.

Education for the tribal community need to be evaluated by a normative framework that will take care of the diverse cultural sensitiveness of the people. The findings substantiate that when identity is informed by education as a social capability, the decision making process displays better choice pattern and/or mirrors ‘modernity’ in all its facets.

Particularly for a minority community, their educational need vis-à-vis their social context being different, mere access to schooling for all do not define ‘equal opportunity’. Instead of concentrating on resources, inputs and outcomes educational evaluations should take into account individual capability sets. The capability, decision to participate and even outcome of formal education is constrained and conditioned by factors which match with Sen’s ‘conversion factor’ of the Capability Approach framework. Given the ethnic consciousness of the community, their typical social boundaries and constraints, education should enlarge freedom, opportunities and choices to attune tribal identity to match the contemporary social order and worldview. The on-going initiatives for promoting education among the tribal community have resulted in mere quantitative change in their capability set rather than initiating a qualitative transformation. Upanishad says “ sa vidya ya vimuktaye”, that knowledge which liberates. Let ‘modernity’ be perceived as a buoyant display of reasoned choice and real freedoms.

7. Conclusion

The ethnic consciousness of the tribal population renders uniqueness in all facets of their living. Their ethnic mind set, diverse social setting has been the basis of their exclusion from the general mass. This basic heterogeneity need to be recognised by the policy makers. The tribal psyche appraises government interventions within their social boundary. Education and its relevance are perceived, however with a different connotation. This paper will be an input for future programmes aimed at ensuring educational

equality for the tribal population. Amartya Sen sketched poverty as deprivation of capabilities, let 'education' ensure enhancement of capabilities as an agenda of 'development as modernity'.

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