Tribal Education and Identity Negotiation in Northeast India: Sociological Analysis of the Tangkhul and Maram Communities

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Abstract: This review paper explores the intersections of education, identity, and socio-cultural change among the Tangkhul and Maram tribal communities in Ukhrul and Senapati districts of Manipur. The paper draws on secondary sources, including government reports, ethnographic studies, policy documents, and sociological literature, to critically examine how tribal students engage with formal education systems and negotiate their cultural identities within rapidly shifting socio-political contexts. It analyses the dual role of education as a mechanism for empowerment and a site of cultural contestation, highlighting how state-led educational agendas challenge or reshape traditional values, language, and indigenous knowledge. The study also reflects on how marginalisation, infrastructural disparities, and cultural alienation impact students' educational trajectories and identity formation. Framing the discussion within applied sociological perspectives, the paper advocates for culturally responsive education policies that recognise the pluralism of indigenous worldviews and promote inclusive development.

Keywords: Tribal education, Identity negotiation, Tangkhul tribe, Maram tribe, Northeast India, Indigenous knowledge, Sociological analysis, Cultural change, Marginalisation, Manipur

Introduction

The Northeast region of India is home to a diverse mosaic of tribal communities, each possessing distinct cultural practices, languages, and social structures. These

communities, numbering over 200 recognised tribes, have historically remained on the periphery of mainstream socio-economic development, mainly due to their geographical isolation and distinct ethnolinguistic identities. The region has also witnessed prolonged ethnic movements and demands for autonomy, rooted in cultural preservation and political recognition. These movements, such as United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) have been significant in shaping the socio-political landscape of the region. Education, within this context, has played a dual role—serving as a means for social mobility and development, while simultaneously becoming a site of negotiation between traditional identity and modern state-driven agendas.

Systemic challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, language barriers, and curricular disconnect with indigenous worldviews, mark tribal education in the region. However, despite these hurdles, education also offers a transformative potential. It has the power to reconfigure tribal identities, particularly as younger generations engage with institutions beyond their immediate cultural milieus. This potential for transformation is a beacon of hope for the future of these communities.

Tangkhul and Maram Tribes in Manipur

Within this broader Northeast Indian context, the state of Manipur presents an exciting site for studying tribal education and identity negotiation. The state is home to numerous tribal communities, among which the Tangkhul (a Naga tribe) and the Maram (a subgroup of a Naga tribe) are significant both demographically and culturally. The Tangkhul tribe, with a population of 183,115 according to the 2011 census, specifically in the Ukhrul district, this includes 94013 males and 89102 females. Tangkhuls , primarily inhabits the Ukhrul and Kamjong districts and is scattered around Kangpokpi, Chandel, Senapati, and Imphal East districts. At the same time, the Maram people, with a population of nearly 10,000, are concentrated in the Senapati district. Both communities possess rich oral traditions, clan-based social organisation, and customary practices deeply interwoven with their spiritual and everyday lives. Their unique cultural practices and large population make them key players in the socio-cultural landscape of Northeast India.

As these communities increasingly engage with formal education systems, they face tensions between maintaining indigenous identity and adapting to dominant national cultural norms. The expansion of missionary-led schools, government institutions, and urban migration has accelerated cultural transitions among the

Tangkhul and Maram youth. The resultant shifts in language use, lifestyle, and aspirations reshape individual trajectories and collective notions of tribe and identity.

Rationale and Objectives of the Paper

This paper is based on the need to explore how formal education intersects with identity construction and negotiation processes among tribal youth in Northeast India. While several studies have focused on educational access and infrastructure, fewer have examined the sociological implications of education on cultural continuity and transformation within tribal societies. In light of the growing educational participation among the Tangkhul and Maram communities, this study aims to:

- Examine the role of education in shaping identity among the Tangkhul and Maram tribes.

- Investigate how tribal students navigate cultural values and institutional norms.

- Analyse the socio-cultural impacts of education on community cohesion and traditional knowledge systems.

- By focusing on these objectives, the paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on tribal education as a developmental tool and a dynamic site of cultural negotiation.

Methodology: Scope and Use of Secondary Sources

This paper employs a qualitative, descriptive approach based on secondary data sources. Given the theoretical and exploratory nature of the study, data have been drawn from a wide range of scholarly literature, including academic books, journal articles, government reports, and field-based ethnographic studies. This methodological choice allows for a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge and offers critical insights into the educational and identity-related dynamics of the Tangkhul and Maram tribes.

The review method facilitates cross-comparison of themes such as language, pedagogy, cultural resilience, and youth agency, as discussed in previous sociological and anthropological works. The interpretative framework adopted in this study is informed by critical ethnographic perspectives and theories of identity formation in postcolonial and indigenous contexts.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

"Education is the Influence exercised by adult generations on those not yet ready for social life. Its object is to arouse and to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual, and moral states which are demanded of him by both the political society as a whole and the special milieu for which he is specifically destined." (Durkheim 1956).

Education is central in shaping individual and collective identities, particularly in societies undergoing socio-cultural transformation. From a sociological standpoint, education is not merely the transmission of knowledge but a process embedded within larger structures of power, culture, and social stratification. For tribal communities in India, formal education often introduces values, languages, and ideologies that differ significantly from their indigenous life worlds. This encounter with new cultural codes generates a space where identity is questioned, reconstructed, and sometimes contested.

The identity formation process among tribal students is multidimensional, including ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic components. As they navigate formal schooling, tribal youths are often compelled to straddle their indigenous roots and the dominant national narrative. This duality may result in either a disjuncture or a creative synthesis between tradition and modernity. Thus, education becomes a site of identity negotiation where tribal learners selectively adopt, resist, or reinterpret mainstream cultural elements.

The theoretical lens of cultural reproduction provides a critical understanding of how educational systems maintain existing social hierarchies. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital posits that schools legitimise the culture of dominant groups while marginalising alternative knowledge systems (Bourdieu and Passeron1977). For tribal communities, this means that their linguistic and cultural resources are often devalued within formal education, which privileges mainstream norms, usually aligned with urban, upper-caste, and non-tribal worldviews.

However, the school is not merely a mechanism of domination. Henry Giroux (1983) emphasizes the concept of resistance in education, wherein marginalized groups, including indigenous students, can subvert imposed meanings and create counter-narratives. Through everyday practices, peer interactions, and selective engagement with curriculum, tribal students can express agency and resist cultural erasure. Resistance theory allows us to view education as a contested terrain rather than a unidirectional force.

These frameworks are valuable for examining how Tangkhul and Maram youth navigate schooling while dealing with systemic inequalities and cultural dissonance. They shed light on the subtle yet profound ways tribal learners either conform to or challenge the hegemonic structures embedded in education.

"Indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) refer to the holistic, experiential, and intergenerational body of knowledge rooted in a specific community's interaction with its environment" (Battiste 2002). For tribal groups such as the Tangkhul and Maram, traditional education has historically occurred through oral narratives, rituals, apprenticeship, and communal life. These systems emphasise relationality, spirituality, and ecological balance—values often absent in standardised curricula.

Introducing Western-style formal schooling tends to marginalise or ignore these knowledge systems, resulting in a form of epistemicide (de Sousa Santos 2014). This epistemological conflict can alienate tribal students, making education seem irrelevant or even oppositional to their lived realities. Nevertheless, growing advocacy for intercultural education bridges indigenous and formal pedagogies, promoting cultural pluralism and epistemic justice.

The Tangkhul and Maram experiences with modern education highlight this tension. On one hand, formal schooling provides mobility and access to new opportunities; on the other, it risks diluting traditional ways of knowing unless deliberate efforts are made to preserve and integrate them into contemporary learning frameworks.

As articulated by Homi K. Bhabha (1994), the notion of cultural hybridity is crucial to understanding how tribal identities are neither static nor wholly assimilated. Hybridity refers to creating new cultural forms resulting from the intersection of multiple cultural influences. In the context of tribal education, hybridity manifests in the way students blend indigenous and mainstream norms to form new, negotiated identities.

This process of cultural negotiation is not merely adaptive but also creative and transformative. Tangkhul and Maram youths often engage in strategic hybridity, embracing certain modern elements (e.g., English language proficiency, digital literacy) while retaining essential aspects of their ethnic identity, such as dress, rituals, and clan affiliations. It enables them to participate in a modernizing world without entirely severing their cultural roots.

By adopting the lens of hybridity, this study moves beyond the binary of tradition vs. modernity. It explores how tribal learners reshape their identities

within and beyond educational institutions. It also acknowledges the agency of these communities in redefining their place within a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.

Educational Landscape of the Tangkhul and Maram Communities

The history of formal education among the Tangkhul and Maram tribes is relatively recent and closely linked to external interventions in the 20th century. Before colonial contact, education was primarily informal, embedded within indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and community rituals. Without written scripts, learning was community-based and transmitted through apprenticeship, folklore, and clan institutions.

Early education emerged in the Ukhrul district—home to the Tangkhul Nagas—with colonial administrative expansion and Christian missionary activity. While less affected initially, the Maram community of Senapati district began to engage with the schooling systems by the mid-20th century. Both regions remained educationally underdeveloped until post-independence, when the Indian state began promoting tribal welfare through formal schooling. Over the decades, these districts have witnessed a slow but steady growth in educational participation, particularly at the primary and secondary levels.

Christian missionaries, particularly from the American Baptist and Church Mission Society, played a pivotal role in introducing formal education among the tribal communities of Manipur. For the Tangkhuls, the arrival of Reverend William Pettigrew in 1896 marked a significant turning point. "The Tangkhul Naga tribe has more than a hundred dialects- each village has its dialect… Ukhrul is the principal dialect." (Shimray 2022). Rev. William Pettigrew established the first school at Ukhrul in 1897 and introduced the Roman script for the Tangkhul dialect, laying the foundation for literacy and translation of religious texts.

Missionary education was not merely academic; it involved a cultural and religious transformation. Conversion to Christianity was often a prerequisite for school attendance, gradually eroding certain traditional practices. However, missionaries also empowered many tribal individuals by providing access to education, leadership training, and mobility within and beyond the region. Among the Marams, missionary influence was slower to penetrate but eventually gained ground through Catholic missions and Protestant organizations that established schools and health centres in the 1950s and 1960s (Horam1977). Today, mission

schools remain influential in Ukhrul and Senapati, often seen as centres of discipline and moral instruction. They continue to attract students even in the face of an expanding government education infrastructure.

In post-independence India, the state recognised the educational marginalisation of tribal communities and initiated several policy measures to promote inclusive growth. "The Constitution of India provides special safeguards for Scheduled Tribes (STs), including reservations in educational institutions and special scholarships" (Article 15, 46).

Key schemes such as the **Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP)**, **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)**, and **Right to Education (RTE) Act** have been extended to districts like Ukhrul and Senapati to boost enrolment, retention, and learning outcomes among tribal students. Despite these efforts, implementation challenges remain. Corruption, poor monitoring, and socio-political instability have often hindered the effectiveness of these programs. Moreover, the top-down nature of policy-making often overlooks local cultural contexts, leading to a gap between policy intent and community engagement.

The physical and linguistic barriers to education in tribal areas are substantial. Ukhrul and Senapati are predominantly hilly and remote, with limited road connectivity, especially in interior villages. This geographical isolation affects both the construction and maintenance of educational infrastructure. Schools often suffer from shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate classrooms, and a lack of basic amenities such as drinking water and electricity. Female students in particular face mobility and safety concerns, contributing to gender disparities in enrolment and retention.

Language also poses a significant barrier. Using English or Manipuri (Meiteilon) as the medium of instruction in early grades alienates many tribal students who speak Tangkhul or Maram dialects at home. This disconnect between home and school language often results in poor comprehension, disinterest, and eventual dropout. Although the **National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005** advocates for mother-tongue instruction at the primary level, its implementation in tribal areas has been limited and inconsistent. Several NGOs and local organisations have advocated for **mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE)** in these districts, but policy support and teacher training in tribal languages remain insufficient (Mohanty 2006). The educational landscape, therefore, reflects a paradox: while access has improved on paper, structural and cultural impediments continue to hinder meaningful learning.

Identity Formation and Cultural Negotiation in Educational Settings

Schooling is not just a medium for academic instruction; it is a socializing institution that profoundly influences learners' self-perception and collective identity. For tribal students from the Tangkhul and Maram communities, formal education introduces new worldviews that often contrast with their indigenous upbringing. Within this setting, students form notions of "who they are" vis-à-vis their peers, the curriculum, and institutional norms.

Schools often act as sites where dominant narratives—nationalism, modernity, urban aspirations—are reinforced, sometimes at the cost of tribal worldviews and languages. This can contribute to a fractured sense of identity, where students feel alienated from their heritage to succeed in the modern academic space. Simultaneously, some students use this space to strengthen a hybrid identity that incorporates both tribal and mainstream cultural elements, reflecting a dynamic process of negotiation rather than linear assimilation.

Language and dress are primary markers of identity; in school settings, they become visible symbols of cultural difference. In Ukhrul and Senapati, using English and Meiteilon as official languages in education alienates many tribal students whose home languages are Tangkhul or Maram dialects. Also, having knowledge of English and learning other languages gives the students a sense of pride/genius. As a result, tribal children may suppress their mother tongue to avoid ridicule or academic failure, gradually eroding linguistic identity.

Similarly, traditional tribal attire and customs, such as hairstyles, ornaments, or clan-based greetings, are rarely accommodated in formal schooling. In schools influenced by urban norms or missionary discipline, students may feel pressure to conform to modern dress codes and behavioural expectations, distancing themselves from their ethnic practices (Shimray 2022). Classroom interaction can reinforce this divide, especially when it lacks cultural sensitivity. When textbooks and teaching methods ignore tribal experiences, students often perceive their heritage as inferior or invisible. However, in some schools, especially those managed by local NGOs or church-based organisations, efforts have been made to include folk tales, tribal festivals, and oral histories in extracurricular programs, thus partially validating students' indigenous identity.

The internalization of inferiority is a common psychological outcome of sustained discrimination, particularly when tribal identity is portrayed as primitive or less civilized. This alienation can manifest in dropout rates, low self-esteem,

or reluctance to speak native languages publicly. On the other hand, strong peer networks within tribal groups can act as buffers, fostering resilience and a sense of collective strength. Despite the structural and cultural challenges faced in educational settings, tribal students do not passively absorb dominant ideologies. Many adopt **adaptive strategies** that blend tradition with modernity, reflecting a form of cultural negotiation.

These everyday practices signify **symbolic resistance**—a way of asserting identity without confrontation (Scott, 1985). Some students also participate in youth organizations, tribal student unions, or church-based fellowships that create safe cultural expression and support spaces. Such spaces are crucial for identity affirmation, particularly in contexts where formal schooling remains culturally exclusionary.

Furthermore, social media and digital platforms have enabled a new cultural articulation among educated tribal youth. Online activism, storytelling, and community mobilisation around land, identity, and representation issues show how education can also empower tribes to engage with the modern world on their terms.

Challenges in Tribal Education

One of the most significant barriers to tribal education is the persistence of **structural inequalities** that marginalize tribal communities within the mainstream educational framework. These inequalities manifest in the form of under-resourced schools, poor teacher-student ratios, and limited accessibility in remote tribal regions like Ukhrul and Senapati. Despite numerous state and central government initiatives, disparities in education delivery persist due to systemic neglect and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

More critically, the **pedagogical models** implemented in tribal schools often fail to account for the cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and linguistic realities of tribal learners. Curricula are generally designed with a "one-size-fits-all" approach, privileging dominant languages and worldviews while ignoring local epistemologies. "This absence of **culturally responsive pedagogy** alienates students and reinforces the idea that their indigenous knowledge systems are inferior or irrelevant in formal education" (Mohanty 2006; Kumar 2013).

The **dropout rate** among tribal students, especially at the secondary level, continues to be disproportionately high in Northeast India. Economic hardship, language difficulties, and disengagement with culturally irrelevant content are some

major contributing factors. For instance, in Manipur, dropout rates in tribal districts like Ukhrul and Senapati have remained above the state average.

The **quality of instruction** is another persistent issue. Teachers assigned to tribal areas are often underqualified, poorly trained in multilingual pedagogy, and unfamiliar with the cultural contexts of their students. Frequent absenteeism, language barriers between teachers and students, and lacking engagement with local culture weaken the learning environment. Additionally, **curriculum design** in tribal regions tends to reflect dominant cultural narratives, with little space for tribal histories, customs, or perspectives.

"The omission of local knowledge not only undermines cultural pride but also limits the ability of students to connect their lived experiences with classroom content" (Banks 2006b).

Although tribal societies in Northeast India often display more egalitarian gender norms compared to other parts of the country, **gender disparities** in education persist. Social expectations regarding the role of girls in household chores, care work, and reproductive duties further restrict their educational participation. At the same time, some tribal women have emerged as first-generation graduates and community leaders, showcasing education as a transformative tool for gender empowerment, though such examples remain limited in number and often localised. Moreover, the disconnect between school values and community traditions may lead to **intergenerational tensions**. Educated tribal youth often adopt modern lifestyles, languages, and aspirations that differ significantly from their elders. It can create friction within families and communities, where traditional authority structures and customs still sway. Parents, while encouraging education, may also feel anxious about the perceived erosion of cultural identity and values among their children.

The result is a delicate balancing act for many students, trying to succeed academically while remaining connected to their indigenous roots. Without supportive mechanisms such as culturally sensitive counselling and mentorship, the psychological toll of this dual negotiation can be profound.

Case Reflections from Literature

Ethnographic and sociological inquiries into the lives of Tangkhul and Maram students offer critical insights into how education intersects with tribal identity, aspirations, and structural marginality. "Scholars such as Shimray (2022) and Horam

(1990) have documented the lived realities of Tangkhul students, highlighting the socio-cultural adjustments required as they navigate the formal schooling system".

"Shimray (2022) emphasises how Tangkhul students often experience cultural dissonance in educational settings, particularly when tribal customs and linguistic practices are undervalued".

The Maram, though relatively less represented in mainstream literature, have similarly been studied through community-based research. These studies show that students from Maram areas, such as Senapati, face linguistic alienation, limited exposure to diverse pedagogical tools, and inadequate infrastructure—all of which shape their educational journey.

These ethnographies also underscore the central role of kinship, community networks, and the church in supporting educational pursuits. However, they caution that the assimilation of tribal students into dominant modes of education often leads to a gradual distancing from indigenous norms and knowledge systems.

The aspirations of tribal students are increasingly influenced by exposure to global and urban ideals through education and digital connectivity. For many Tangkhul and Maram youth, education is viewed as a gateway to socio-economic mobility, access to government employment, and urban migration. Aspirational frameworks are often framed as "becoming modern" or "getting out" of poverty and geographical isolation.

However, studies indicate a mismatch between aspirations and actual **life outcomes**. Due to limited access to quality higher education, inadequate career counselling, and a saturated job market, many graduates from tribal communities remain underemployed or are compelled to return to their villages without sustainable livelihoods. This leads to frustration and disillusionment, especially among first-generation learners celebrated as community progress symbols.

"Despite this, education continues to function as a symbolic capital within the community, raising the social status of the educated even if material gains remain limited" (Bourdieu 1977).

Community organizations and civil society have played a significant role in responding to the educational challenges the Tangkhul and Maram communities face. Tribal student unions, women's organizations, church bodies, and youth forums have mobilized resources, monitored school functioning, and advocated for culturally inclusive education. In Ukhrul and Senapati, community-based interventions have included tutoring programs, language preservation efforts, and scholarship schemes supported by local NGOs and religious institutions.

Moreover, some schools initiated by church-based missions or village councils have incorporated tribal languages and cultural values into extracurricular activities, creating more culturally responsive spaces for learning. These efforts, while localized, suggest the potential of **bottom-up educational reform** driven by community agency.

At the same time, the role of civil society is not without limitations. Resource constraints, politicisation of tribal institutions, and dependency on external funding often hinder long-term impact. Nevertheless, these community responses reflect a commitment to maintaining cultural identity while striving for educational advancement.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

One of the foremost policy imperatives in addressing tribal educational marginalization is integrating **indigenous knowledge systems** into the mainstream curriculum. Tribal epistemologies—rooted in oral traditions, ecological practices, community-based learning, and local histories—have long been excluded from formal education in India. For the Tangkhul and Maram communities, this exclusion often results in cultural alienation and reduced engagement in learning.

Incorporating local histories, folklore, festivals, and traditional ecological knowledge into syllabi can validate students' cultural identity and enhance their cognitive engagement. Models such as Odisha's *Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education* (MTB-MLE) have shown that early education in the mother tongue significantly improves learning outcomes among tribal children (Mohanty 2006). A similar approach tailored to the linguistic and cultural diversity of Manipur's hill tribes could promote both educational equity and cultural preservation.

The success of culturally responsive education depends heavily on **teacher training and sensitisation**. Teachers—especially those from non-tribal backgrounds—often lack familiarity with the socio-cultural environment of tribal students. This can lead to miscommunication, stereotyping, and reduced effectiveness in instruction. Sensitisation programs should include modules on tribal histories, values, kinship systems, and oral traditions to bridge this gap.

Moreover, **community involvement** is critical for sustaining educational efforts. When parents, elders, and local institutions such as churches or student unions are engaged in school governance, it increases accountability and contextual relevance. Establishing community-school partnerships can also facilitate language

maintenance, moral education, and conflict resolution through culturally embedded methods.

The broader educational system in India requires **structural reform to become more inclusive and pluralistic**. Education policy must go beyond tokenistic inclusion and instead embrace a vision of multiculturalism where diverse worldviews co-exist within the classroom. "The major goal of Multicultural education is to provide all students with the skills, Attitudes, and knowledge needed to function within their community cultures, within the mainstream culture, and within and across other ethnic cultures" (Banks 2006b). For tribal communities in Manipur, this includes linguistic inclusion and pedagogical shifts toward participatory learning, experiential methods, and context-based teaching.

Institutional mechanisms such as curriculum review boards and textbook committees must include tribal scholars and educators to ensure that materials reflect diverse identities. Such pluralistic reforms also require decentralisation, allowing local education authorities to tailor content and teaching methods to community needs without undermining national standards.

Perhaps the most transformative step would be to enable **participatory policy-making** that ensures tribal voices are not just heard but actively shape educational discourse. "Current policies are often top-down, with limited input from those most affected—tribal students, parents, and educators" (Nongbri 2003). Ensuring meaningful tribal representation in state education boards, teacher recruitment panels, and curriculum development committees is essential for ethical and effective governance.

Furthermore, youth-led initiatives and civil society organizations from within tribal communities should be recognized as stakeholders in the education ecosystem. Participatory governance would help move from a deficit model—where tribal communities are seen as backward and needing mainstreaming—to a **rights-based model** that affirms diversity as a resource.

Conclusion

This review examines how education shapes identity and socio-cultural negotiation among Manipur's Tangkhul and Maram communities. Drawing on secondary sources and sociological insights, it finds that while education offers pathways to empowerment, it is also a space of tension and negotiation. Historical influences— like missionary work, state policy, and local efforts—have expanded access, yet structural inequalities, cultural disconnects, and limited opportunities remain.

Educational spaces profoundly affect identity formation, as tribal students navigate between tradition and the demands of mainstream schooling. When schools recognise indigenous languages and knowledge, they promote cultural pride; when they do not, they risk alienation and identity loss. Education is not neutral—it is a cultural and political process. Future research should explore how tribal identities evolve within education, using community-based and intersectional approaches. Policy must foster inclusive, locally rooted systems that respect tribal perspectives and promote equity and cultural continuity.

Ethical Considerations and Conflict of Interest

This study relies solely on secondary data drawn from published academic and policy sources; hence, no primary data collection involving human participants was conducted. All sources have been appropriately acknowledged, and care has been taken to ensure accuracy, integrity, and cultural sensitivity in interpretation. The author declares no conflicts of interest in relation to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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