

# ഇശൽ പൈതൃകം

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Mahakavi Moyinkutty

Vaidyar

Mappila Kala Akademi

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Pin: 673638

India

Ph: +91 483 2711432

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## **Tribal Girls and Higher Educational Aspiration**

**Sreedevi. A.S**  
**Navas Shareef. P.P**  
**Dr. Reesha Karally**

Tribal women face double marginalization due to being a tribe and women. These communities have historically faced marginalization and disparities in access to resources and opportunities in all spheres of social life due to their socio-cultural and economic background. Education plays a crucial role in empowering tribal communities and improving their socio-economic development, preservation of their rich cultural heritage and enhancing quality of life. Educational Aspirations refers to an individual's desire to attain a certain level of education, pursue a specific field of study and professional achievements. Educational Aspiration is influenced by personal interest, socio economic background, family, social and peer support and exposure to educational opportunities. Educational Aspiration plays a significant role in shaping an individual's academic choices, career pathways and overall life outcomes. The objective of the present investigation is to study the Educational Aspirations of tribal girls' students. The study was conducted among 100 Higher Secondary Tribal Girl Students in Model Residential Schools of Wayanad District. The researcher followed a mixed method approach by collecting data using self-developed Educational Aspiration Scale and also by conducting a semi structured interview among their teachers to know the issues and challenges faced by tribal girl's students to pursue higher education.

**Keywords:** Educational Aspiration, Higher Education, Marginalisation

## Introduction

Tribal communities around the world have unique identity and often have rich cultural heritage. They are most backward sections of the society. The reasons for the backwardness are social, cultural, economic and linguistic diversity. The culture of tribes differs from the culture of the other section of the society. There is a visible difference when it comes to faith, ritual, food, clothing and language. The linguistic diversity of the tribes is important while examining the tribal culture. Tribes face linguistic difficulties in the entire sphere of life. The main reason for this difficulty is that tribal groups have their own language which has no written form. This linguistic distinction serves the major problem of their educational process (Muneer, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

According to the 2011 Census, the educational status of Scheduled Tribes is lower compared to other communities. Specifically, their literacy rate is 59%, which is 14% lower than India's overall literacy rate of 73%. Even in Kerala, the literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes is 75.8%, exceeding the national average but still falling short of Kerala's general literacy rate, leading to an 18.8% literacy gap within the state. This state-level gap is larger than the national gap, indicating a concerning disparity despite the relatively high literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes in Kerala.<sup>2</sup>

According to Kerala Economic Review 2023-2024 Tribal students constitute 1.87 per cent of total enrolment in schools in 2023-24. 3.42 percent of tribal students are enrolled in Government schools, 1.22 percent of tribal students enrolled in aided schools and private 0.46 percent of students in unaided schools. During 2022-2023 academic year 82.92 per cent of students were eligible for higher studies. A total of 313,382 students passed among 174,124 girls and 139,258 boys. The pass percentage of Scheduled Caste students during the period was 60.89 per cent and that of Scheduled Tribe students was 58.60 per cent. 8,496 tribal students were admitted to degree and postgraduate courses in the state. Which is 2.41 percent of the total student enrolment. While compared to the previous academic year of 2020-21 enrolment rate was 2.32 percent there is a slight improvement in the enrolment rate.<sup>3</sup>

The dropout ratio of ST students is still higher than other students. The government of India is constantly implementing many programmes and schemes to improve the educational status and reducing the dropout of backward sections of the society. Several Residential schools were established in order to reduce dropout and to ensure the free education, accommodation, nutritious food for the students. The Tribal Residential School includes Model Residential Schools/ Ashram Schools and Eklavya Model Residential Schools.

As per Report on Model Residential Schools 2019-2020 the Model Residential Schools is a residential school addressing the difficulties of setting up Primary Schools in tribal areas, fostering an environment suitable for learning: The absence of a supportive learning and teaching environment is common in many tribal families. These schools strive to establish a welcoming and positive space that encourages students to excel in their studies. They offer vocational training, preparing students for improved job and career prospects.<sup>4</sup>

MRS plays a pivotal role in addressing educational disparities and empowering tribal students. There are model residential schools especially for tribal girl students in order to ensure safe and secure education. The journey for tribal girls in pursuit of higher education is not just about academic success, but also a profound transformation of their identities, aspirations, and roles within their communities and beyond. When women gain education, they are more likely to be aware about their rights, actively participate in decision-making, and take on leadership positions in their communities. Education that gradually transforms traditional beliefs and expectations surrounding women's roles and abilities. Higher education is the way to attain financial independence. By attaining higher educational qualifications, they are able to get more opportunities for employment and contribute to their families' economic prosperity. Economic empowerment is important to breaking the cycle of poverty. To create a better life, tribal girl students need higher educational aspirations. In this study the investigator analyses the higher educational aspirations of higher secondary tribal girl students and their challenges.

## Theoretical framework

Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical constructs of cultural capital, habitus, and social reproduction have become seminal in sociological studies of education particularly in understanding how class-based inequalities are perpetuated across generations. Social capital provides powerful lens for understanding how social networks, relationships, and group affiliations influence access to resources and opportunities. Unlike economic capital which involves material wealth or cultural capital, education and cultural knowledge, social capital refers to the benefits individuals derive from their connections with others. It is embedded within social relationships and can be mobilized to secure advantages in various fields including education, employment, and social mobility. Bourdieu emphasized that social capital like other forms of capital, is unequally distributed and often reinforces existing social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1986).<sup>5</sup>

Huang (2019) examines Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus to explain how social mobility is influenced and class structures are maintained. Cultural capital includes non-financial assets such as education, language, and cultural knowledge that offer social advantages. Bourdieu identifies three interrelated forms of capital economic, social, and cultural and argues that affluent families can convert their economic resources into cultural capital that enhancing their children's social position. Cultural capital exists in three forms embodied in language skills, behaviour, objectified (books, instruments), and institutionalized (academic degrees). Bourdieu refers to the internalized habits, values, and dispositions shaped by one's social environment. It influences how individuals perceive the world and navigate social settings. The cultural capital and habitus help explain why social inequality persists those from privileged backgrounds are better prepared to succeed in systems that reward their pre-existing advantages, reproducing class distinctions over time. The cultural capital and habitus offer a powerful explanation for why social inequality persists. They reveal that success in education and professional life is not just about individual ability or hard work but also about inherited social advantages. These mechanisms work to maintain the class distinctions as individuals from privileged

backgrounds are often better equipped to meet institutional expectations and gain access to further opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars have explored and expanded on this theory in various contexts highlighting both its strengths and limitations. Edgerton and Roberts (2014) proposed the structure disposition practice (SDP) model which integrates cultural capital, habitus, and social capital to provide a more holistic understanding of educational inequality. This model shows how middle-class families not only possess more social and cultural capital but also actively cultivate these resources to enhance their children's academic advantage. This highlights the intersection of various forms of capital in shaping life outcomes and reinforces the idea that privilege is often reproduced across generations.<sup>7</sup>

The role of social capital becomes particularly evident in contexts of marginalization and educational disadvantage. Allard (2005) study on economically disadvantaged young women in Australia demonstrates how access to or exclusion from social networks can either support or hinder educational aspirations. The research shows that social capital can empower individuals, its absence can leave marginalized students isolated within academic settings.<sup>8</sup> Similar studies from India reveal that upper-caste students in elite universities benefit from stronger peer networks even under affirmative action policies. These networks offer emotional support, academic guidance, and social validation, which are often unavailable to Dalit and Adivasi students thereby reinforcing systemic privilege (Pathania & Tierney, 2018).<sup>9</sup>

Tait (2016) examines social inequality and the distribution of capital in Kerala, India, using Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework of capital. Despite Kerala's progressive image and its long-standing political efforts against caste-based discrimination, structural inequalities still significantly affect Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation (CREST) in Kerala further illustrates the complexity of social capital in practice. CREST aims to build social and cultural capital among marginalized communities to improve employability, its

meritocratic framework may obscure deeper systemic inequalities. Ethnographic findings suggest that students from disadvantaged backgrounds despite of acquiring new skills and credentials still face discrimination and exclusion due to entrenched social hierarchies. This raises critical questions about whether programs that promote integration into existing systems can also equip individuals to challenge those very systems.<sup>10</sup>

Social capital is also deeply gendered and influenced by cultural norms. Silva (2005) critiques Bourdieu's framework for reinforcing patriarchal assumptions by assigning women a passive role in the transmission of cultural capital. Emphasizing the role of mothers in cultural socialization defining children's social status through the father, traditional interpretations of Bourdieu overlook the evolving dynamics of family life and women's agency. This perspective is particularly relevant in studies of tribal women such as the research conducted in Ganderbal, Kashmir which shows how patriarchal norms, limited mobility, and economic constraints restrict tribal women's access to education and social participation (Khan et al.,2024).<sup>11</sup>

Public policy and institutional support play a crucial role in mediating access to social capital. Bhoi & Lakra, (2022) highlight how fellowships and financial aid programs can increase educational access for Dalit and Adivasi students. The bureaucratic delays and inadequate implementation often limit their effectiveness. These findings underscore the need to reconceptualize social capital within policy frameworks that account for the lived realities of marginalized groups, rather than assuming equal capacity to benefit from institutional resources.<sup>12</sup>

The social capital theory applied critically that reveals the nuanced ways in which social relationships shape inequality and opportunity. It helps explain why individuals with similar talents or educational credentials may have vastly different outcomes based on their access to social networks and supportive structures. Bourdieu's original formulation offers foundational understanding, contemporary research across different social and cultural contexts suggests the



need for a more flexible and inclusive approach to analysing how social capital operates within and against systems of power.

### **Aspirations in Education**

Aspirations have become a central theme in contemporary discussions on poverty, education, and development. The concept of the capacity to aspire introduced by Appadurai (2004) has been especially influential in reframing aspirations as socially and culturally situated capabilities rather than mere individual desires or psychological traits. Challenges the binary between culture and economy arguing that aspirations are shaped by cultural contexts and seen as a navigational capacity developed through social experience. The wealthy have more opportunities to develop this capacity and the poor due to limited exposure and opportunity tend to have weaker aspirational structures. To remedy this inequality advocates for empowering marginalized communities by enhancing their “voice” and participatory agency thereby aligning development with both cultural recognition and economic redistribution. Appadurai repositions culture as a dynamic forward-looking force in development, arguing that fostering aspiration and collective voice enables marginalized groups to transform their socio-economic conditions, contributing to a more inclusive and just development model.<sup>13</sup>

Building on Appadurai’s work Leßmann (2024) engages with the compatibility between the capacity to aspire and Amartya Sen’s capability approach. Argues that Appadurai’s conception should not be treated as a separate capability but rather as a manifestation of agency within Sen’s framework. Ortrud Leßmann’s paper critically examines the intersection of Appadurai’s concept of the capacity to aspire and Amartya Sen’s capability approach. Appadurai views the capacity to aspire as a culturally situated collective faculty that helps individuals particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds have envision and pursue improved life paths. This challenges traditional economic models that treat aspirations as individualistic and linked solely to economic mobility.

Leßmann critiques efforts within the capability approach to incorporate aspirations, arguing that terms like capability to aspire

often fail to capture the social and collective dimensions of aspiration, as emphasized by Appadurai. Appadurai's idea should be recognized as an expression of agency within Sen's framework. Aspiration from this perspective is not just an individual trait but is shaped by social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Leßmann advocates for a more integrated dialogue between Appadurai and Sen suggesting this would deepen the understanding of how marginalized communities form and pursue aspirations within systems of structural constraint. Aspiration, in this view is a socially constructed process shaped by cultural, institutional, and relational contexts. Leßmann (2024) calls for a more integrated dialogue between Sen and Appadurai to better understand how collective and contextualized aspirations function in development.<sup>14</sup>

Hart (2016) further develops this view by examining how aspirations contribute to capability formation and human flourishing. She critiques narrow policy interpretations that equate aspirations with economic goals and argues for a justice-oriented approach. Aspirations are dynamic and shaped by individual agency and structural conditions with feasibility judgments playing a critical role in whether individuals pursue them.<sup>15</sup>

La Ferrara (2019) adds a complementary economic perspective emphasizing that both internal constraints like low self-belief and external constraints like poverty and lack of exposure shape aspirations. Low aspirations can become a poverty trap, limiting investment in education or innovation. Policies that expose individuals to role models or challenge stereotypes can help raise aspirations. Without expanding real opportunities such interventions may generate frustration rather than progress.<sup>16</sup>

Bok (2010) applies Appadurai's concept to the field of higher education. Investigates how students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds in Australia aspire to higher education but often lack the navigational tools necessary to achieve those goals. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural capital, and field, shows how privileged students have access to legitimized cultural knowledge, while marginalized students face symbolic violence and alienation. Also distinguishes between 'hot' (relational) and 'cold' (institutional)

information, arguing that access to relational networks significantly impacts students' post-secondary decisions. Advocates for outreach and equity programs that go beyond promoting aspiration and instead build students' capacity to aspire.<sup>17</sup>

Gale and Parker (2015) critique the prevailing educational discourse that treats low aspiration as an individual deficit. Argue that aspirations are embedded within broader social imaginaries, financial conditions, and institutional exposure. Drawing on survey data from regional Australian students show that disadvantaged students often recalibrate their educational goals not due to lack of ambition but in response to real constraints. Call for systemic policy reform that enhances access to cultural knowledge and social capital, thereby supporting both the desire to aspire and the ability to act on it.<sup>18</sup>

Pasquier-Doumer and Risso Brandon (2015) extend this analysis to the context of indigenous children in Peru. Explores whether low aspirations among these children contribute to their continued socio-economic exclusion. Using data from the Young Lives study find that when controlling for socioeconomic status indigenous children have aspirations similar to their non-indigenous peers suggesting they have not internalized racial inferiority. Socioeconomic conditions still shape aspirations, influencing language acquisition and academic performance. They identify two channels external channel poverty and lack of information and an internal channel discrimination and stereotypes. External channel plays more significant role and they warn that both unrealistically high and very low aspirations can negatively impact educational outcomes. Advocate for structural interventions to remove external barriers and promote equitable access to education.<sup>19</sup>Bottom of Form

Educational aspiration is a psychological construct that reflects an individual's cognitive form of motivation, closely tied to their academic goals and self-perception. According to Hanson (1994) educational aspiration involves "early impressions of one's own academic abilities and the highest level of education that an individual has attained." It signifies how individuals envision their academic future

and what they believe they can achieve based on their self-assessment and personal ambitions.<sup>20</sup>

Educational aspiration is also influenced by the individual's expectation of success which is linked to academic performance and self-esteem. As Drever (1952) notes this expectation acts as a frame of reference or a benchmark against which individuals evaluate their experiences. In this context educational aspiration can be understood as the highest level of education an individual desires to achieve, serving both as a personal goal and a motivational driver for academic tasks.<sup>21</sup>

Trebbels (2014) defines educational aspiration as “the educational goals that individuals set for themselves” highlighting it as a reflection of ambition and the willingness to pursue academic success. It encompasses the objectives, drive and persistence shown by individuals in their educational journey. These aspirations are shaped by various factors including cultural and family background, socioeconomic status, school environment, and personal attitudes towards education.<sup>22</sup>

Educational aspirations are crucial because they are directly tied to academic achievements and long-term life outcomes. They represent instrumental goals viewing education as a means to attain career success, financial security, personal development, and a desired lifestyle. Recognizing its importance Behera and Samal (2005) selected educational aspiration as a significant variable in their study comparing tribal and non-tribal secondary school students in Odisha, India. The how educational aspiration not only reflects personal ambition but also highlights systemic differences shaped by broader social and cultural contexts.<sup>23</sup>

Educational aspiration is multifaceted concept that combines individual motivation, environmental influences, and perceived future opportunities, playing a critical role in shaping students' academic trajectories and life paths.

## **Objectives of the study**

- To study the level of Higher Educational Aspirations among higher secondary tribal girl students in Model Residential School.
- To study the challenges and issues to pursue higher education for tribal girls.

## **Methodology of the study**

### **Method**

The mixed method was used for research. The survey method for quantitative research and semi structured interview were used for the qualitative data collection.

### **Sample**

A total of 100 tribal girl higher secondary students from Model Residency school in Wayanad were selected by using the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling was appropriate for this study due to the specificity of the target population of tribal girls pursuing higher secondary education. Their educational aspirations were the central focus of the investigation. The non-probability sampling method used the researcher which is relevant to the research objectives. The sample was not selected randomly the findings cannot be generalized to all tribal girls across different regions or educational institutions.

Prior to data collection informed consent was obtained from the participants along with institutional approval from school authorities and. Participants were briefed on the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any stage, and the intended academic use of the data. No personally identifiable information was collected and the strict confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

### **Tool**

The researcher developed the three-point Likert Scale of Higher Educational Aspirations for measuring the higher educational aspirations of tribal girls in which has the dimensions of Available support and assistance from school community and peers, Parents' view and support regarding Education, Pupils' effort to attain educational goal, Reality of aspired goal and Pupils' views regarding values and benefits of education.

### **1. Available Support and Assistance from School Community and Peers**

This refers to the degree to which tribal girls perceive emotional, informational, and motivational support from their teachers, school authorities, and peer group. Support systems play a vital role in shaping aspirations especially in underprivileged communities.

Examples from the Scale:

Item 11 “Teachers provide information about various courses and educational institutions to choose from after Plus Two.”

### **2. Parents’ View and Support Regarding Education**

This captures the attitudes, expectations, and encouragement provided by parents regarding the importance and continuation of their daughter’s education. The parental attitudes can be either a strong enabler or a significant barrier. Examples from the Scale:

Item 18 “I feel that my family’s financial challenges will significantly affect my further education.”

### **3. Pupils’ Effort to Attain Educational Goal**

The student’s internal motivation, persistence, and commitment to achieve their academic goals despite personal or external obstacles. It reflects the self-driven initiative to overcome challenges.

Examples from the Scale:

Item 8 “I am confident that it is possible to achieve high success in Plus Two and continue my studies.”

### **4. Reality of Aspired Goal**

This assesses how realistic the girl perceives her aspiration to be, based on perceived obstacles, self-confidence, and access to resources or information. It reflects the gap between desire and feasibility.

Examples from the Scale:

Item 5 “I do not think that pursuing further education is particularly beneficial considering my social situation.

## **5. Pupils' Views Regarding Values and Benefits of Education**

This captures how tribal girls perceive the personal, social, cultural, and economic value of education. It reflects their beliefs about how education can transform their lives and community.

Examples from the Scale: Item 24 "I believe that pursuing higher education will improve my quality of life."

### **Scaling Method**

A three-point Likert scale was used to record the responses of participants enabling the measurement of the degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement related to educational aspirations. For positive items scoring is direct: Agree = 3, Undecided = 2, Disagree = 1 and for negatively worded items reverse scoring is applied: Agree = 1, Undecided = 2, Disagree = 3. Content validity of the Educational Aspiration Scale for Tribal Girls was ensured through expert judgment. Items that were found to be unclear, redundant, or irrelevant were either revised or removed. This process ensured the scale had content validity and covering all the relevant aspects of educational aspiration of tribal girls. The reliability of the scale was established using the split-half method which assesses internal consistency. A reliability coefficient of 0.78 confirming that the scale yields internal consistency when measuring educational aspiration among tribal girls.

Semi structured interview conducted among teachers to know the issues and challenges to pursue higher education for tribal girls. Teachers were selected on the direct experience with tribal students and their understanding of the educational and socio-cultural barriers these girl's encounter. The responses from the interviews were analysed using the thematic analysis approach. Open coding was conducted to identify meaningful segments related to challenges and support systems to pursue the higher education among tribal girl students. Codes were generated for recurring ideas such as lack of parental support, early marriage, gender roles, financial hardship, language barriers, and cultural differences. Codes were then grouped into broader themes such as Gender specific challenges, Socio economic status, Familial support, Cultural and social barriers, Health issues, Lack of Awareness, Personal Hygiene and Reproductive Knowledge.

Analysis and Interpretation

Variable	Level of Educational Aspiration	Percentage
Educational Aspiration	High	19%
	Average	65%
	Low	16%
Total		100

Table 1: Level of higher educational aspirations among higher secondary tribal girl students in Model Residential School.

The table reveals that 19% of Higher Secondary Tribal Girl students have high level of educational aspiration, 65% of Higher Secondary Tribal Girl students have an average level of educational aspiration, and only 16% of Higher Secondary Tribal Girl students have low level of educational aspiration. This reveals the tribal girl students in the model residency school have higher educational aspiration but their enrolment and retention rate in higher educational institutions is very low.

The challenges and issues to pursue higher education for tribal girls

Semi structured interview was conducted among teachers to know the issues and challenges to pursue higher education for tribal girls which has following dimensions gender specific challenges, socio economic status, familial support, cultural barriers and health issues. The teachers reveal that most of the students have higher educational aspirations but majority of the students are not properly receiving higher education due to some socio-economic barriers. The hindrances mentioned by the teachers are

**Gender specific challenges:** The parental conservatism, financial constraints, early child marriage, lack of mobility, household burden, lack of support from family, discrimination and violence are major challenges. Traditional beliefs and customs restrict opportunities for personal growth and independence of the tribal girl student. Restricted mobility due to cultural norms or safety concerns limit tribal girl’s



access to education. They often bear the brunt of household responsibilities, including caregiving, cooking, and cleaning. Balancing these duties with personal aspirations is challenging. Supportive families play a vital role in empowering individuals. Unfortunately, they are lacking the encouragement to pursue education, career goals and personal interests.

**Socio economic status:** Due to impoverished socio-economic conditions limit their access and affordability of higher education especially the professional education and employment opportunities. The cost of education, including tuition fees, textbooks, and living expenses, cannot be affordable for economically disadvantaged people. Access to specialized professional education (such as medical, engineering, or legal studies) becomes challenging due to financial limitations. These fields often require substantial investment in terms of fees and resources.

**Familial support:** lack of parental support and their illiteracy hinders the higher education opportunities of students. The students have high aspirations to higher education due to lack of family support and they cannot pursue higher education. Parents struggle to understand the importance of education and fail to provide academic assistance to their children. Having high aspirations for higher education, students from unsupportive tribal family backgrounds often face roadblocks. These students have no proper knowledge to enrol in colleges or universities due to inadequate information about application processes, financial aid, and available programs. Financial constraints, lack of encouragement, and limited access to resources prevent them from pursuing their dreams.

**Cultural and social barriers:** The tribal students face cultural and social barriers in pursuing higher education and employment opportunities, such as discrimination, social interaction, isolation, language difficulties, lack of family and peer support, etc. This affects their self-confidence and educational aspiration levels. Tribal students encounter discrimination based on their cultural background. Stereotypes, biases, and unequal treatment hinder their access to higher education. Cultural differences also lead to social isolation.

They are often challenging to integrate into mainstream educational environments due to distinct customs, traditions, and communication styles. Tribal students may not be proficient in the dominant language of instruction, affecting their comprehension, participation, and overall academic performance. Negative experiences and societal biases erode self-confidence. Feeling marginalized and the other feeling affects their belief to trust their own abilities and potential.

**Health issues:** The challenges faced by tribal girl students in attaining higher education are deeply intertwined with health-related issues, particularly those arising from ignorance, inadequate personal hygiene, insufficient health education, poor menstrual hygiene management, and a lack of reproductive knowledge. These factors not only impact their health but also significantly hinder their educational opportunities and outcomes.

**Lack of Awareness:** A fundamental barrier is the lack of awareness about basic health practices and preventive measures among tribal communities. This ignorance of health issues that disrupt girl's education. Not understanding the importance of preventing common diseases can lead to absenteeism or even dropping out of school entirely.

**Personal Hygiene:** Access to clean water and sanitation facilities is critical for maintaining good health, yet these are often scarce in tribal areas. Menstrual hygiene is a critical area where tribal girl students face significant challenges. The absence of proper menstrual care, access to sanitary products, and awareness can lead to health complications and embarrassment, causing girls to miss school during their periods. Education on personal hygiene is equally important. Without these, tribal girl students may face health problems that prevent them from attending school regularly, thereby affecting their educational progress.

**Reproductive Knowledge:** lack of proper understanding of reproductive health, family planning, and safe practices is often lacking among tribal girl students. This gap in knowledge leads to health issues that further complicate their pursuit of higher education. Health

challenges faced due to early childhood pregnancy of tribal girl students hinder to attain higher education

## **Conclusion**

The educational aspirations of tribal girls reflect complex interplay of structural inequalities, cultural norms, and individual agency. Review highlights how educational choices and aspirations among tribal girls are shaped not merely by individual ambition but through deeply entrenched socio-cultural and economic factors. The influence of caste, class, gender, language, and rurality creates a field where aspirations are often curtailed by systemic barriers, including poverty, inadequate infrastructure and low parental education. Government initiatives such as residential schools and scholarships have made some inroads yet gaps remain in addressing the cultural disconnect between school systems and tribal communities.

Educational policies can play a crucial role in enhancing opportunities for tribal girl students in Kerala by addressing structural inequalities and ensuring inclusive and culturally responsive education. Based on insights drawn from the study ways in which targeted policies can contribute to their educational advancement.

- 1. Countering Discrimination and Stereotypes;** Tribal girls face subtle forms of bias and exclusion in educational settings. Policies should promote inclusive pedagogy through teacher training, culturally sensitive curricula, and awareness campaigns that challenge stereotypes and affirm tribal identities within schools.
- 2. Encouraging Parental and Community Participation;** Sustainable change requires community support. Involving parents and local leaders in school governance and curriculum development can ensure that educational programs are responsive to local realities and encourage greater enrolment and retention of tribal girls.
- 3. Addressing Socioeconomic Barriers;** As the aspirations of tribal girls are often shaped by poverty and limited exposure to opportunities. Initiatives scholarships, free school supplies, digital learning tools, and access to nutritious meals can motivate continued education and reduce dropout rates.

4. **Ensuring Equal Access;** Many tribal girls in Kerala face barriers to education due to poverty, remote habitation and lack of infrastructure. Policies should prioritize expanding school facilities in tribal regions providing residential schools like MRS or hostels, offering transportation support and ensuring access to menstrual hygiene products and clean sanitation facilities to help retain girls in school.
5. **Promoting Multilingual and Culturally Relevant Education;** Tribal students in Kerala often grow up speaking their indigenous languages. Introducing multilingual education that incorporates tribal languages alongside Malayalam and English can enhance comprehension and learning outcomes while preserving their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Inclusive and context-sensitive education policies in Kerala can empower tribal girl students by removing external barriers, fostering aspiration and creating learning environments that value their identity and potential.

#### Endnotes:

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**Sreedevi. A.S**

Research Scholar

Department of Education

University of Calicut

Pin: 673635

Ph: +91 8157915424

Email: [sreedevinanil.a.s@gmail.com](mailto:sreedevinanil.a.s@gmail.com)

ORCiD: 0009-0009-8045-4005

**Navas Shareef. P.P**

Research Scholar

Department of Education

University of Calicut

Pin: 673635

Ph: +91 8129271657

Email: [navaspoonthodan9@gmail.com](mailto:navaspoonthodan9@gmail.com)

ORCiD: 0009-0008-4303-8806

**Dr. Reesha Karally**

Assistant Professor

Department of Education

University of Calicut

Pin: 673635

Ph: +91 9496362993

Email: [reeshakh@gmail.com](mailto:reeshakh@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0009-0003-8793-7882