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DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND HUMAN RIGHTS: LIVELIHOOD INSECURITY AS A BARRIER TO EDUCATION AMONG THE REANG (BRU) PVTG IN DHALAI DISTRICT, TRIPURA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines social exclusion and human rights fragility among the Reang (Bru) PVTG of Dhalai District, Tripura, focusing on precarious access to schooling. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork across four subdivisions, the study analyzes how livelihood insecurity—manifested through irregular income, illness, debt, and physical isolation acts as a structural impediment to education. It argues that for the Reangs, education is not a secure constitutional right, but a "hard-won possibility" constantly threatened by the struggle for survival. Findings reveal that despite valuing education, families are forced to sacrifice it when "survival necessity" outweighs long-term development. The study concludes that meaningful educational inclusion requires addressing these fundamental human rights and livelihood vulnerabilities, rather than relying solely on infrastructure expansion.

KEYWORDS: Social Exclusion, Human Rights, Livelihood Insecurity, Educational Policy, Reang (Bru) PVTG, Institutional Fragility, Dhalai District.

1. INTRODUCTION

The prevailing view of education holds the view that education is the most reliable bridge that connects poverty and opportunity in the light of human capital theory that education is a major driving force of social mobility (Sen, 1999; Dreze and Sen, 2002). Although the policy space uses schooling as an entitlement of universal right—echoing the mandates of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2007) in which the benefits should supposedly fall onto the enrolled students automatically, this argues that the educational gap in the case of Dhalai is not just the failure of infrastructure, but failure of human rights, whereby social exclusion functions by the daily processes of debt, illness, and institutional neglect (Silver, 1994; Levitas et al., 2007). Though development is being promoted in terms of expansion of infrastructure and enrolment, it is presumed that implications of education will come automatically upon the availability of an institution (Govt. of India, 2014). Nevertheless, the critical scholarship has presented the way in which these narratives have obscured the unequal social and spatial circumstances of schooling to indigenous people at the peripheral of development (Xaxa, 2012; Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery, 2008; Sedwal and Kamat, 2008).

Education is not a course of action to the Reang (also known as Bru) community of Dhalai District in Tripura, but it is a place of conflict. It is craved and intensely maintained, but it can be broken by ordinary daily existence any time (Reang, 2014). With schooling, parents relate it with opportunities that they did not have, although the attendance of the children is characterized by intermittent school visiting, the long-discontinuities, and withdrawal (Biswas, 2011). These tendencies do not qualify as the attributes of cultural apathy, rather they are victims of vagaries in livelihoods, frequent morbidity, domestic borrowings, and physical burdens of studying in distant schools (Reang, 2021; Tripura, 2018).

Parental indifference or ignorance has long been accounted in culturalist explanations about educational exclusion in tribal regions (Nambissan, 2000). Such explanations of deficit by tribal scholars however caution against such explanations, focusing instead on structural inequalities and the 'cultural disconnect' between the school system and the tribal lifeworld (Battiste, 2002; Xaxa, 2008). According to Xaxa (2012), the performance of schooling of Scheduled Tribes is among the past dispossession and the precariousness of livelihood, not about

cultural orientation. Similarly, according to Karlsson (2011), tribal marginality in Northeast India is a political-ecological activity that institutionally creates groups of people that are unintegrated in the developmental set-ups.

In continuation of these critical perceptions, this paper locates schooling in the structural limitations of Reang families in Dhalai District (Reang, 2017). Rather than asking the question why children are not staying in school, it poses the question how families are finding it difficult to send children in school in a situation where people will never be assured of food security and health. In Dhalai, families are not making decisions on whether to learn or have fun, but is it education or life, a dilemma observed among indigenous populations globally where poverty creates an 'opportunity cost' for schooling (Hall & Patrinos, 2012). Schooling is sacrificed on account of wage work disappearing, or monsoon halting transport, or schooling first (Biswas, 2011; Desai et al., 2010; Sujatha, 2002).

The studies carried out on Northeast India continue to show geographical influence on schooling. As demonstrated by Thongni (2013) and De (2018), even the expanding infrastructure in hilly, forested districts does not get formal educational establishment. Distance also needs to be taken into account with regard to terrain and weather, which results in what De (2018) refers to as an episodic schooling style. Dhalai education is therefore not complete, it is pursued using monotonous efforts about enrolment but is prone to interference. Such swings form some jumbled teaching trajectories, which do not conform to the perceived assumption that schooling is linear (Jeffrey et al., 2008).

The social-economic setting of Tripura has a peripheral role and is concentrated in regions that have long been beyond the state planning process (Baruah, 2016). Their livelihoods highly depend on daily wage labour, forest produce, and jhum farming that are low in sustainability and always experience economic shocks (Kar, 2014; Reang, 2017). As Sharma (2015) remarks, this precarity leads to chronic indebtedness so that when there is a crisis, all possible labour resources mobilize the families. As a result, education and survival at the present moment compete (Biswas, 2011). Families are in an endless trade-off between education and the use of household labour to deal with food shortages or debts (Sujatha, 2002; Xaxa, 2014). This type of trade-off is not visible in administrative documents when a child may be enrolled on records, but in fact may be missing (De et al., 2011; Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2008).

Space also exacerbates marginality. The jagged hills and scattered villages of Dhalai get physically isolated when the monsoons strike, forming a world where people have mobility as a barrier to development (Karlsson, 2011). Before roads get flooded and bridges collapse, commutes are hazardous; families withholding children back to school are not saying they do not want to school their children, but as part of physical protection. This weakness is worsened by institutional weaknesses, especially systemic teacher absenteeism at distant institutions (Das & Goswami, 2019). In case of lack of connectivity, teachers are unable to travel, and the children will be sent home without being taught and this is a major setback to the home confidence in the school as a quality institution (The PROBE Team, 1999; Kremer et al., 2005). This aspect of unreliability results in gradual withdrawal and withdrawal (Sujatha, 2002; Sedwal & Kamat, 2008).

Moreover, the lack of healthcare in the tribal areas transforms simple diseases into chronic absenteeism (Baruah & Karmakar, 2016). Whenever disease strikes a family, the children are thrown into care giving or house labor making it harder to resume education. These three factors that lead to livelihood insecurity, spatial isolation, institutional weakness, and health vulnerability accumulate to cause a scenario where education is continuously deferred. It is not repressed, being deferred and remodeled.

This paper encapsulates these processes using the qualitative accounts, which is corrupting the acquisition of facts explaining that exclusion is achieved using deficits. It argues that the growth of infrastructure cannot enhance any significant inclusion by itself (Sedwal & Kamat, 2008). Schooling will remain suspended in limbo until the livelihood and spatial basis of the daily survival is dealt with (Xaxa, 2012). The education in marginal conditions cannot be discussed outside the frame of time instability. It is both the process of involvement and non-involvement according to the seasonal rhythm of the household (Biswas, 2011). Where there is a failure of conditions, the schooling is retrogressive (Sujatha, 2002).

Such repetition creates the educational liminality or the silent exclusion whereby children are neither inside nor outside the system fully (Lewin, 2009; Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2008). The discrepancy between institutional time and household time brings about cumulative disadvantages (Nambissan, 2000). The immense emotional work of re-negotiating admission and refreshing lessons cannot even be noted in a policy-based environment where success is gauged on an enrolment basis (Dreze and

Sen, 2002). The mystery envelops the moral economy of surviving that causes children to leave their classrooms when the interpretation of educational discontinuity is only based on statistics of dropouts (Hunt, 2008).

Lastly, the school experience in Dhalai is to be placed in historical context of the marginalization of tribes in Northeast India. Exclusionary form of governing territories in PVTG areas like that of Reang has long been in existence (Karlsson, 2011; Baruah, 2016). Education is, therefore, not merely a provision of an organization but a place where historical disparities are recreated in everyday life.

Dhalai District and Fragile Access to Schooling

The development profile of Dhalai District serves as a unique location in the formation of development policies in Tripura since the low level of development is not simply a compilation of poor indicators, but interventions of remoteness, dispersion of settlements and poor institutional access to basic services, including school services. The Tripura Human Development Report (2007) clearly presented intra-state inequality as the issue of dissimilar spatial integration where overall state-level progress goes along with chronic deprivation on the one hand in districts and blocks. In Dhalai, this disparity is heightened by the settlement pattern of the district that has numerous habitations which are small, scattered and entrenched in forests or hilly topography, so that the cost of getting them is paid daily in time, distance and physical effort instead of being encoded in administrative coverage itself.

A key empirical background to this context is given by the *District Census Handbook Dhalai* (Directorate of Census Operations Tripura, 2011a, 2011b), which records village-level amenities (including schools and health centres), road connectivity, mode of transport, and healthcare. These handbooks demonstrate that even though learning institutions formally exist in most of the villages, their accessibility is not homogeneous due to weak connectivity and the physical separation of most habitats from service centers (Mishra & Nayak, 2008). That is why schooling in Dhalai is still perilous despite the existence of schools on paper: the spatial and infrastructural arrangement which defines compulsory school attendance is not resolved by the mere existence of structures (Sujatha, 2002; Sedwal & Kamat, 2008).

The fact that Dhalai is an Aspirational District by NITI Aayog only supports its official status as the region with specific needs to be addressed in different areas of human development, including

education (NITI Aayog, 2018; 2022). Therefore, as the institutional level of education is being supervised, the daily life of schooling in remote settlements remains to be influenced by the condition of the infrastructure being converted into the trusted local competence, the safety of movement, and the forecast ability of schools operating.

This is macro portrait of Dhalai which is given by the own profile of the district, i.e. Dhalai District as a Glimpse, which gives a reflection about the population size, administrative units/ geographic spread (District Administration, Dhalai). But these are only a summary of the practical distance between homes and school or of the seasonal variations according to which the roads, the streams and the forest trails become usable or unsafe. The school runs to remote panchayats and hamlets does not represent a daily commuting trip to the school; it is a negotiated day-to-day activity that is influenced by topography and climatic factors. The weak roads and footpaths help to turn the distance into a risk during the time of monsoon, and the overflowing streams make the short trip to an unsafe cross. Drop rates are not a phenomenon that happens due to the decrease in the value of schooling but because the cost involved in going to school continues to increase drastically and in an unpredictable manner.

The weakness can be also seen in weather shock responses in governance. As an example, reports of school closures in the hilly regions of the state of Tripura indicated in extreme cold weather conditions report that climate and exposure are considered as valid limitations on school operation in hilly geographies (Times of India, 2026). This kind of suspension exposes how environmental exposure is a legitimate cause of school suspension in these districts, and this highlights how school time in hill districts is continuously disrupted by climatic conditions in a manner that most schooling schedules never expect.

Defective access in Dhalai is at the same time a question of space and place, as well as administrative setups and institutional capacity. Tripura has large tribal majorities, which are administered by the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC), which operates several primary schools under its own education department (TTAADC, n.d.). This multi-layered unit of government brings a complicated administrative climate to provision of schooling in tribal regions. Recently, recent reporting has seen the light shedding light on the high form of single-teacher primary schools in a TTAADC region, a staffing design, which directly influences the continuity in instruction and classroom stability in

the remote areas (Economic Times, 2025). With small staffing in schools, the loss of any one teacher can bring teaching to a stop undermining the integrity of schooling in the eyes of the household.

The issue of institutional fragility also intersects with livelihood precarity that is broadly reported during the studies of the tribal economy in Tripura. A study of shifting cultivation practice in Tripura shows how jhum phases, environmental pressure to the environment and evolving cultivated land areas determine household labour requirements and seasonal labour heavier workload (Das & Das, 2014; Singh, 2012). Recent livelihood research also emphasizes mixed and volatile income streams of tribal areas that are composed of both subsistence agriculture, wage employment and forest-based staffing, and generate uneven cash flows and repeated reliance (NIRDPR, 2021). In that case, the cost of schooling, will become hard to afford on a regular basis, and the attendance of the children will be most vulnerable in the periods of income gaps or the peak in the labor demand.

The development interventions have also changed the settlement and livelihood patterns indirectly influencing schooling. A recent case study on the peer-reviewed case study of regrouped villages in Tripura explains how shifting cultivation communities transformed to the emerging form of settlements modifying the everyday mobility and access to services as well as imposing new constraints and trade-offs (Debnath and Datta, 2022). These reconfigurations influence the relationship between households and schools both in space and social terms, which supports the thesis that access to schooling cannot be determined by looking at infrastructure provision alone.

These structural pressures are enhanced by health vulnerability. The documentation of the medical facilities in the village level of the Census handbooks abbreviates the non-uniform distribution of the access in Dhalai (Census of India, 2011b). In the situation where treatment involves distortion in getting to the place of treatment, then illness becomes an attendance shock and not a temporary interruption. All houses have to focus on care giving and recovery and frequent health-related absences create a cumulative learning deficit that becomes more challenging to fill.

Each of these dynamics exists on wider infrastructure boundaries. In the audit of Tripura social and economic sectors conducted by Comptroller and Auditor General, there are mentioned inefficiencies and delays in constructing and maintaining roads (CAG, 2018). Incomplete and

degraded roads mean that teacher mobility is difficult, the number of transportation options reduces, and the amount of travel taken by children every day is lengthy and perilous. The construction of infrastructure therefore has a direct influence on educational continuity.

Lastly, the topicality of Dhalai to the national discussions on the inequality in education became precisely evident during the pandemic when digital schooling became a focus of new tiers of exclusion. A survey of children on virtual schooling in aspirational districts that has been conducted in an NCERT journal specifically in Dhalai showed how poor connectivity, lack of devices, and poor electricity reliability in tribal interiors were translated into a long learning loss due to school closures (NCERT, 2021). These results support the premise that educational vulnerability does not pertain to the mere existence of schools, but to the infrastructural ecology in general which carries learning.

With combined effect, reports on human development in the districts, census-based village directories, studies of education governance and livelihood research show that there is a fragility in access to schooling at the convergence of challenging terrain, seasonal disconnection, constrained household economies, institutional capacity inequality and poor infrastructure. Within this realm, enrolment may accompany irregular attendance, a school may exist without anyone understanding what ought to be taught, and education could be treasured and still be very much interrupted again.

2. METHODOLOGY

The paper is presented in three analytical parts which are related to each other. Part I discusses the structural context that forms fragile access to schooling within the Bru (Reang) community in Dhalai District around livelihood insecurity, spatial isolation and poor planning of uneven development. The second part looks at how household reality in the form of illness, loss of earnings and debts interfere with the education participation. The third part is a critical evaluation of the levels of schooling that current educational and welfare programs cover in these marginal settings and how much it allows Reang households to continue with education in the long-term.

The qualitative research method was undertaken to gain the feelings of how schooling is experienced in real life. The research work was carried out in the four administrative subdivisions of the Dhalai District - Longtrai Valley, Ambasa, Kamalpur and

Gandacherra. A total of 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants across these sub-divisions, of which 12 participant narratives are directly included in this study to illustrate the key themes and lived experiences of educational exclusion. To systematically capture, a careful selection approach was followed in the study that from each of the sub-divisions, the two highest and lowest populated village panchayats inhabited by Reang were selected.

The sub-division of Longtrai Valley included the village panchayats of West Kathalchara, East Malidhar, Jamirchera and Makorchera which are engaged in field. Kornomoni Para, Kulai RF, Lalchari and Kamalachera, were found in Ambasa subdivision. Kamalpur subdivision covered Setrai, Sambuchak, Mendi and Dhanchandra Chow Para whereas Ultacherra in the Gandacherra Subdivision comprised Chitrajhari, Dalapati and Narikelkunj. This systematic coverage saw to it the representation of both fairly accessible settlements, as well as remote hamlets. Standing visits were also done in various stages between March 2025 and December 2025.

All the communications were done in "Kaubru" (native language of Reang Community) and translated to English. Informed consent was obtained for the use of participants' names and ages; in instances where such consent was not granted, pseudonyms or aliases were employed to safeguard their anonymity.

Structural Conditions Shaping Fragile Access to Schooling in Dhalai District

Livelihood Insecurity as a Determinant of Social Exclusion

The majority of the Reang households rely on a combination of unstable workforce based on daily wages earned, forest produce, shifting cropping and seasonal work in plantations. Studies on tribal livelihoods in Northeast India have continually established that these types of income portfolios offer no continuity and no economic shock protection, leaving households vulnerable to chronicity (Kar, 2014; Sharma, 2015).

This insecurity is increased during monsoon months. Livelihood seasonality is researched on tribal communities in eastern and northeastern India, in which rainy season is associated with an increase in food insecurity and use of informal credit at predatory interest rates (Krishna, 2018). Under such circumstances, schooling is weakened. In the same way, Uaingsouhha Reang (35) of East Malidhar narrated how changes in livelihood determine the schooling of his children. When questioned of how

his children were attending school throughout the year, he said that their schooling largely relied on the presence of wage labor in the village. Considering this indecision he said:

"My children attend school daily when labor work is done regularly in the village. Those months I will be able to make ends meet with rice and minor costs. However, as soon as the rains fall, it becomes difficult to get work. And even then it is hard to organize food and schooling gradually lost its place in our everyday life."

According to Kostorai Reang (48) of Kornomoni Para,, seasonal work in the forest constantly disrupts the education of his son. Talking of the lean months, he stated:

"with very little regular wage work, we go to the forest to harvest bamboo, wild vegetables and firewood to enable us to sell them at the market. My son often helps me. These are the times that my son misses school. Upon visiting it finally, he is also embarrassed that the teacher has already proceeded with the syllabus and he is no longer able to follow the lessons."

Medical, crop failure or loss of employment suddenly forces the family to bring children into domestic or income earning activities. As Krishna (2018) illustrates in his longitudinal study of the dynamics of poverty, repeated coping responses are likely to add up in the form of long-term consequences, becoming permanent withdrawal into educational withdrawal. Other trends are also followed in tribal districts of Odisha and Jharkhand, where Desai et al. (2015) demonstrate that household shocks of the economy have a strong association with the probability of school dropout.

Distance, terrain and the daily journey to school

When the economic basis of schooling is quickly undermined by livelihood insecurity, it is geography that drains it physically. Dhalai District is typified by steep hills, full forest cover and sparsely spread settlements that are far apart and are not close to educational institutions. When we enquired to Bina Reang (34) of Chitrajhari how her daughter was able to go to school every day, she expressed her apprehension in all quiet and emotional manners:

"Every morning, my daughter is out of our house to ensure that she gets to school on time. On the way there are forest covers. It is fine in summer, but towards the wet months the water just covers her, and the rocks are very wet. She appears with wet clothes and busted legs many times. Anytime she fails to show up at the normal time I always become worried that there might be something that occurs during the process."

Research conducted on hill districts in Northeast India points to this fact indicating that these trips are not commute exchanges but physical activity and

unyielding routines that inform both attendance and motivation to study (Thongni, 2013; Bordoloi, 2014).

Studies of the schooling system of remote tribal areas suggest that exposure to the environment is a key determinant that dictates attendance especially in younger age (De, 2018). These distractions amount to academic exhaustion. Children lose lessons, become alienated among peers and can hardly fit back. This trend is conceptualized by De (2018) as an episodic schooling where education is interrupted and reinstated, which weakens gradual development. Geography therefore transforms schooling into a basic routine to a conditional one that is related to weather, physical stamina and health. Kanshiram Reang (45) of Setrai remembered that once, an accident at the monsoon caused the entire schooling of his son to be put on hold for one month. Discussing the rainy season he said:

"during June-September the road is not a road anymore. It is reduced to mud and broken stones. A year ago, my son fell in one of the drains and broke his leg. He was forced to spend nearly a month at home due to inability to walk well. Even when he had regained good health, I was afraid to send him back at the time when the rains were still very weighty."

Institutional Fragility and Policy Discontinuity

These weaknesses are further subject to institutional vulnerability. Dhalai have many schools in the interior that are skeletally staffed, probably with irregular schedules and an inordinate number of absentees. Research on deployment of the teachers in tribal Northeast India demonstrates its consistent deficiency as well as that of poor monitoring in distant blocks (Das and Goswami, 2019). Barman (2017) observes that institutional unreliability has a negative direct effect on parental investment in education in the tribal regions. When inquired by us as to the day-to-day life of her daughter in school, Mina Reang (33) of Kulai RF said somewhat distress:

"many days my daughter herself will go out of the home early in the morning and will walk longer than an hour to go to school. And when she returns and does not even attend a class the teacher does not appear. At other times she begins to cry and tells her that she is tired of walking so far only to discover classroom without teacher. Once this happened repeatedly, I know she has just lost heart to continue to attend a school."

Families in a situation where the means of survival is weak and the travel is tedious cannot afford to operate such systems that fail to meet the expectations. Combined, both livelihood insecurity and geographic isolation, combined with institutional frailty extrude schooling in Dhalai as a precious prospect and not a reliable right.

The Micro-Dynamics of Educational Exclusion

Illness and care inside the home

Most settlements are very far away, and health facilities are usually far and as such they involve extremely long walks to reach them through broken roads and woody trails. The research on healthcare accessibility in tribal Northeast India always reveals that primary health facilities are located poorly and understaffed and are hard to reach during the monsoon, transforming minor issues into long-lasting crisis (Baruah & Karmakar, 2016; Sen and Saha, 2018).

When we asked Aslangti Reang (41) of Mendi, concerning the influence of sickness on education in her family, she told us about how her family went through a silent disturbance, she replied

"last winter my husband had a serious fever, which could not be resolved during several weeks. The closest health facility is quite distant, and the road is in a bad condition hence I needed to take him to hospital and eventually admit him to hospital. In the same days my elder daughter was at home taking care of her younger siblings and cooking. Initially I believed that it would be within few days, however the disease progressed. My daughter had already missed so many classes."

At times of sickness, children stay at home. Others come with their own family members to health facilities, and some assume household duties like looking after younger siblings, preparing food, gathering water or forest food, and doing household chores (Biswas, 2011; Nambissan, 2000). Recovery does not take place very quickly, and this is not only due to the fact that physical weakness persists but recovery after their long absence makes it difficult both academically and socially to get back to school (Hunt, 2008). Children find themselves lagging behind in lessons, uncertain about speaking during classes, and being out of place with children who are already ahead of the curriculum (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2008). Sickness therefore causes accruing didactic disruption. As time passes, the families start to regard schooling as an ad hoc, and not a regular term that can be put on hold when the survival needs are at higher risk. Where healthcare systems are poorly organized and fragile livelihoods cause tribal settings, illness is one way educational exclusion is created gradually.

Debt, work and the tenuous survival of education

Overall, the financial pressure is a prevalent characteristic of life among the Reangs. Daily wage labour, seasonal agricultural labour, and forest-based livelihood income are received meagerly and sparingly. Families borrow when work is lost or occasions of emergencies occur. Research conducted

on rural indebtedness in India indicates that families that do not have formal credit access depend on informal moneylenders who may charge high-interest rates, which make them susceptible to future shocks (Nair, 2016; NSSO, 2014). When we inquired of Bauyarai Reang (50) of Jamirchera how debt had found its way into his family, he put it thus:

"two years ago I had to borrow 20,000 from my local moneylender to take care of my wife, who had become critically ill. The interest continued to grow by monthly. As the work in the fields slowed down I could make no recompense to it. It is then that my older son ceased attending school and started assisting me in gathering firewood and bamboo, which was sold in the market. We maintained that it was a brief period. But this has hampered his studies."

With the growing financial pressure, education is slowly giving way to surviving. Children start to help with collecting the forest, mining the land, or doing low-paid jobs in order to balance the family earnings (Biswas, 2011; Xaxa, 2014). Such instances are hardly presented as choices to quit education. They are perceived as transitional adaptations that are required in order to sustain the household in times of crisis (Sujatha, 2002). The forfeited lessons turn into the forfeited terms and, finally, the classroom is forgotten in the swing of everyday life. Withdrawal in education, here, is not an incidence but a process that happens gradually and in a reluctant manner, influenced by circumstances beyond the control of the household (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2008; Hunt, 2008).

In rural areas of India, longitudinal studies of poverty shifts reveal that recurrent livelihood shocks leave households in so-called downward mobility traps in which households cannot recover in the wake of crisis due to copying mechanisms that subvert long-term investments like education. Similar results are shown by Desai et al. (2015), who show that children living in families with debt and economic stress are much more predisposed to dropping out or repeat grades despite the school being formally available. These dynamics are also compounded in Dhalai by the seasonal nature of employment. Plantation labor, production of forest products and daily wage labor vary drastically throughout the year. The households involve all available members to get food and income during lean months. Child labor is risk management and not exploitation a policy to stabilize the weak household economies.

When we interrogated Phuihsrangti Reang (37) of Ambasa, of the influence of seasonal work on the education of her children, she explained how education gradually become a mere shadow in their lives:

"in the lean months my children rise early in the morning and accompany their father to other fields to work. They also return exhausted and sleep in the evening and do not even open their books. Initially they had tried to combine work with school though gradually school was being lost."

Researchers on the topic of child labor in tribal areas urge against realizing such involvement, however, in the framework of moralism, but rather, due to structural inability to access secure livelihoods (Bremar, 2016).

Debt is therefore seen to be a mute intermediary of schooling and poverty. It does not bring children out of school right away but reinvents an alternative household agenda. Families will delay in buying uniforms or notebooks, spill over in paying incidental school expenses and ultimately accept nonattendance as a normal way of living. Throughout the period, the child becomes less educative and coming back is even less probable. When we asked Sunita Reang (40) of Sambuchak how micro-finance had changed her family, she explained that a loan borrowed in desperation gradually became a trap:

"some years ago I borrowed money on a micro-finance bank to operate my family when we ceased to receive the daily work. Initially I believed that the instalments were small and could be easily handled. However, when there was no regular employment, I began defaulting. The interest continued increasing and the field officer started visiting our house each week. To make the instalments my elder son dropped out of school and took up employment with us. I was constantly telling myself that it would be a temporary situation, however, the loan has not gone, and my son is not a student anymore. The loan seems like it had rescued us albeit temporarily, but it turned out to be a trap."

Illness, debt and labor demands combined in such a manner give us household worlds where there is endless interruption of schooling. Making an appearance to protect their lives, these interruptions do not represent the lack of interest, but rather the survival strategies developed at the expense of structural constraint. Education is still cherished in theory but its sustainability is sacrificed time and time again as families manoeuvre the risky nature of daily living.

When the State Is Present but Schooling Remains Fragile

Welfare without continuity

The state is literally visible in the daily lives of the people across the Reang villages of Dhalai District in the scheme of food rations, schools mid-day meals, subsidized housing schemes, and occasional cash

schemes (Directorate of Economics & Statistics, 2020; Khera, 2011). These interventions matter. Families always realize that this support allows them to endure such difficult times of imminent distress and cushion the most adverse impacts of poverty (Biswas, 2011; Drèze & Khera, 2017). The same results have been applied in terms of welfare delivery in most of the tribal areas in India which have found that such public systems of distribution and in some cases nutrition programmes have become vital in maintaining household consumption when the seasons have declined (Khera, 2011; Dreze, and Khera, 2017). Discussing the impact of government support on the benefits of the schooling of her children, Purnima Reang (42) of West Kathalchara looked back upon the hard choices her family had to make:

"every month we receive rice in the ration shop and my children go to school to eat the mid-day meal there. These are what keep us alive, like when the rainy season comes, there is no work. However, during acute crisis all the housing scheme money and a portion of the ration savings had been used to buy medicines and other essential stuff. Between choosing to purchase notebooks to my children or spending money on buying vegetables to the family. I chose food. Government provides support, which is short-lived in reality in the challenges of our day-to-day living. The cost of school is our liability, and when a crisis comes, school-going is the first thing to be held back first."

Once livelihoods are destroyed or sickness has emptied the pockets of households, the state support is quickly moved into the economy of survival. The rations do not change the conditions that make schooling vulnerable but only provide relief to hunger. School expenditures such as uniform, stationery, examination and transport are still household expenses. There has been a longstanding argument by social protection scholars that welfare schemes are not only needed, but they must be supplemented with a livelihood stabilization and service delivery reform to achieve long-term outcomes of human development (Dev, 2015).

Evidence is also provided by the study of the Public Distribution System in tribal India that has shown that the food security interventions are planned to treat the caloric intake and not the continuity of education (Khera, 2011). Although midday meals have been proved to enhance enrolment and temporary attendance, such impacts are dependent on the larger household economy. According to Dreze and Khera (2017), the mid-day meal scheme is most useful in the situation when the livelihood remains rather stable, and household finances allow people to invest in schooling. Even in such places as Dhalai, the scheme is washed out by

the fact that insecurity is high and families constantly face the temptation to discontinue education.

School buildings without certainty

The infrastructure in schools has grown in Dhalai in the last decade. On the one hand, this growth is a positive step. But the reality in life will tell us otherwise. These teachers are mostly moved around, or they have to drive long distances or trek to schools they cannot get to during the monsoon (Biswas, 2011). Consequently, classes are suspended, the school schedule is erratic, and the education chain is broken, leading to high dropout rates among tribal students (Chaudhury et al., 2006; Sujatha, 2002). Empirical research on teacher allocation in India reiterated the idea that expansion of infrastructural support in India without corresponding investment in staffing sustainability, results in what Ramachandran et al. (2018) call empty schools, which are facilities that lack reliable teaching. Shankar Reang (40) of Mendi when we interviewed him on the routine of his son at school explains how a breakdown in the institution day by day led him to a gradual loss of faith in schooling:

"....my son goes out of the house earlier than seven in the morning and covers more a long distance to the school building. Some days he returns before noon without picking a book. The teacher remains in town and does not come whenever the weather is bad since there is no means of transport and bad road conditions. There are cases when a classroom is isolated, sometimes the case of a single teacher entering and leaving. Altogether there are only few teachers that too do not turn up for school regularly. The school building exists and sometimes there is nobody in it. There came a time after a few months when I began questioning myself why I was forcing my child to walk a long distance as there was no guarantee that anyone would teach him. Ultimately vanishing the interest to go to school."

This kind of experience destroys confidence in schooling as a reliable institution. Other researchers also observed these results in their Assam and Meghalaya research of school functioning; the irregular attendance of teachers was reported to directly decrease the parental confidence and retention of students (Barman, 2017; Bordoloi, 2014). With time, the families start to perceive schooling as something unpredictable, a part that can work or not work on each day.

Infrastructure is thus used symbolically and not substantially. This is an indication of the existence of the state but not of the survival of the schooling. Education governance scholars suggest that this lack of service delivery and achievement is especially severe in remote tribal areas, where allocation of monitoring mechanisms is feeble and institutional responsibility is decentralized (PROBE Team, 2019).

Education vs. Survival: The Human Rights Trade-off

In the case of Reang households in Dhalai District, education is never felt as a sure product of enrolment but rather a process one has to continually negotiate given the livelihood insecurity, illness, distance, and institutional uncertainty conditions (Biswas, 2011; Xaxa, 2014). Learning schools can hardly be left behind. It is rather maintained by the recurring efforts to come back after a long break, and every effort is informed by the practicality of the situation in the household surviving (Reang, 2014).

Parents talk of re-enrolling children when they have been absent after several months and request the teachers to accept them back and also persuade children who are already older than their age mates to rejoin classes (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2008). Such attempts include academic deficit management, restructuring normal routines, and combating discomfort in the process of reentering after many years (Nambissan, 2000). Parents escort children to school, visit teachers, and seek to reestablish school attendance in already debt and sickness-stricken and seasonally unemployed families (Tripura, 2018; Sedwal & Kamat, 2008).

When we interviewed Gobinda Reang (55) of West Kathalcheria regarding his struggle to keep his daughter educated over a long period of time, he talked in a low hushed tone resignation:

".... we had been trying to maintain our daughter in school so many years. Each time she paused we attempted to send her home, but incessant illness in the family, increasing debts and unemployment gradually tired us and her of education. These issues continued to reoccur into our home over and over again. One day my wife told me that, we now did not have the strength to struggle all along at once, and that was the day that we gave up. Not that we had lost any affection with education, but that we were too sleepy to keep on doing that."

The crises of medical emergencies, loss of income, debt and physical weight of distance are just some of the results of this hoarding over time, can lead to the loss of the ability to continue with schooling by the household. Parallel accounts are given by longitudinal studies on the poor and education in rural India that educational exit is not sudden and, rather, a product of cumulative disadvantage (Krishna, 2018; Desai et al., 2015).

3. CONCLUSION

The paper has analyzed weak access to education among Bru (Reang) people of Dhalai District in the context of educational participation through the daily actualities of livelihood insecurity, spatial isolation and institutional unpredictability. Instead

of viewing interrupted schooling as a symptom of cultural disposition or ignorance, the analysis has shown just how the education is constantly being subjected to structural constraints that, in turn, are out of the control of individual families.

The results indicate that education in Dhalai can only be continued based on certain and usually short-lived conditions. The economic basis of educational vulnerability is livelihood instability and geography makes the exit out to school physically challenging and seasonally hazardous. Fragility in the institutions also compromises sustenance by having uneven staffing, unreliable operations and poor infrastructural coverage.

At the household level, the issues of illness and debt are introduced as the key methods of educational dislocation. Health crises restructure the domestic sphere, create a sense of long-term lack, and some financial pressure will build up quietly, with borrowing and a lack of income, pushing schooling to work. This means that educational withdrawal is not a decision, but rather a gradual process of compromise.

Persistence is also recorded in the paper. Families recidivistically seek to re-enroll the child, bargain with the teachers and reconstruct the routine, after long disruption. However, such initiatives do not last forever. In the instance that crises become chronic, survival always prevails over aspiration.

Ultimately, the case of Reang PVTG shows that a burning issue to the developed world regarding global human values is that without the assurance of livelihood, legal rights to education will have no sense.

The policy interventions should thus shift emphasis on the nominal, such as school enrollment, to the dynamics of exclusion in social settings, that is, health, debt and hunger, which drives families to resort to abandoning their long term right to survival in favor of survival on short term basis. Education can only be turned into a human right when it is anchored on the livelihood foundation instead of remaining a mere possibility.

The findings of this study carry significant policy implications across multiple domains. First, **livelihood security** must be integrated into educational planning through income stabilization programs, agricultural support during lean seasons, and social safety nets that prevent crisis-driven school withdrawal. Second, **health access** requires urgent attention establishing mobile health units, community health workers in remote areas, and school-linked health services can reduce illness-related absences and the care burden on children. Third, **education governance** needs fundamental restructuring: ensuring teacher availability through incentivized postings, creating all-weather road infrastructure, and establishing residential facilities in geographically isolated areas. These interventions must be implemented synergistically rather than in isolation. Policymakers must recognize that sustainable educational inclusion among marginalized communities like the Reang PVTG cannot be achieved through educational policy alone it demands coordinated action across livelihood, health, and infrastructure sectors, grounded in the lived realities documented in this study.

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