

## EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT AND HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF TRIBAL STUDENTS THROUGH EKLAVYA MODEL RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

**Shoyab Ahmad**  
Research Scholar  
Shri J.N.M. P.G. College,  
University of Lucknow  
Email: shoyabahmadmalik@gmail.com

**Dr. Mani Joshi**  
Associate Professor(B.Ed)  
Shri J.N.M. P.G. College,  
University of Lucknow  
Email: manijoshi9@yahoo.in

### Abstract

Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India have historically faced systemic barriers to education, including geographical isolation, socio-economic disadvantage, and linguistic diversity. To address these disparities, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) introduced Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs), designed as fully residential, CBSE-affiliated institutions that integrate academics, sports, vocational training, and cultural education. This paper conceptually examines the role of EMRSs in promoting educational empowerment and holistic development of tribal learners, while critically assessing the challenges faced in their implementation. Drawing on secondary data from MoTA, the National Education Society for Tribal Students (NESTS), policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), and scholarly studies on tribal education, the study adopts a conceptual and descriptive design. Thematic analysis highlights key opportunities such as expanded access, parity with national educational systems, skill development, and cultural integration. At the same time, significant challenges are identified, including community hesitance, language transition gaps, staff shortages, infrastructural deficits, governance complexities, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms. The discussion emphasizes the interlinkages between opportunities and risks, underscoring the need for accountable governance, community engagement, and balanced modernization rooted in cultural identity. The study offers a set of recommendations, including language-smart schooling, regional governance hubs, staff welfare and professional development, streamlined board affiliation, and robust monitoring systems. EMRSs represent a transformative model for inclusive and equitable education, capable of reshaping tribal education and empowerment in line with NEP 2020. If the identified challenges are addressed with adequate resources and sustained community participation, EMRSs can evolve into replicable models of holistic education that balance social justice, cultural preservation, and human development.

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**Shoyab Ahmad**  
**Dr. Mani Joshi**

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**Keywords**

*Eklavya Model Residential Schools, tribal education, holistic development, NEP 2020, inclusive education, governance, cultural preservation*

India is home to one of the largest tribal populations in the world, with Scheduled Tribes (STs) constituting 8.6% of the total population (Census of India, 2011). Despite constitutional safeguards, STs remain one of the most socio-economically marginalized groups, facing persistent barriers to educational access and attainment. Several factors contribute to these disparities: geographical isolation of tribal habitations, poverty, limited access to quality schools, linguistic and cultural dissonance between mainstream curricula and tribal contexts, as well as systemic neglect in policy implementation (Xaxa, 2020; Ministry of Tribal Affairs [MoTA], 2023). Historically, the school participation rate of tribal children has been lower than that of other social groups, with higher dropout rates observed particularly at the upper-primary and secondary levels. These challenges often reinforce cycles of deprivation, restricting upward social mobility and perpetuating socio-economic inequality (Rao, 2019).

The Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs) were conceptualized in 1997–98 as part of the government’s effort to provide quality education to tribal children in remote and disadvantaged areas (MoTA, 2023). The initiative gained significant momentum after 2018–19, when the Union government announced the expansion of EMRSs to every block with at least 20,000 tribal people and a 50% tribal population share. These schools are fully residential institutions aligned with the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum, designed to deliver equitable and high-quality education to tribal students (National Education Society for Tribal Students [NESTS], 2024). Unlike conventional government schools, EMRSs provide an integrated environment that includes hostel facilities, sports infrastructure, science and computer laboratories, and spaces for cultural activities. This holistic framework is intended not only to improve academic outcomes but also to promote socio-emotional growth, leadership skills, and self-confidence among tribal youth (Kumar, 2019). The design of EMRSs reflects the state’s commitment to overcome structural bottlenecks—such as distance to schools, affordability, and lack of exposure—while simultaneously offering aspirational opportunities that bring ST learners at par with their mainstream counterparts (MoTA, 2023).

The significance of EMRSs lies in their ability to act as bridging institutions that reduce longstanding disparities in access, retention, and quality. By removing barriers like poor infrastructure and limited affordability, EMRSs foster parity with mainstream education while remaining sensitive to the distinct cultural identities of

tribal communities (Sharma & Singh, 2022). Importantly, the schools provide a platform for tribal children to pursue diverse pathways in STEM disciplines, sports, vocational training, and liberal arts, thereby widening their career options and life chances. Moreover, EMRSs emphasize identity preservation alongside integration. Unlike earlier models of assimilationist education, which often eroded indigenous languages and traditions, EMRSs incorporate tribal art, heritage, and languages into the learning process. This balance between modern education and cultural rootedness is critical for empowering tribal youth without alienating them from their community ethos (Xaxa, 2020).

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 underscores equity, inclusion, and holistic development as central pillars of educational reform. It advocates mother-tongue instruction in the early years, flexible academic pathways, experiential and multidisciplinary learning, and integration of vocational education with mainstream schooling (Government of India, 2020). EMRSs align closely with these policy goals, as they seek to blend academic rigor with co-curricular dimensions such as sports, arts, and vocational training (MoTA, 2023). Furthermore, NEP 2020 highlights the importance of catering to socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs), including tribal communities, through targeted initiatives. EMRSs exemplify such targeted inclusion, serving as institutional models that operationalize NEP's vision at the grassroots. By situating high-quality, CBSE-aligned education within tribal-dominated regions, EMRSs contribute directly to realizing the NEP's emphasis on accessible, equitable, and inclusive education.

Thus, in both design and intent, EMRSs serve as a vital instrument for bridging educational inequities faced by tribal children, while aligning with India's larger developmental and policy frameworks. Their role extends beyond schooling to creating aspirational ecosystems that integrate tribal learners into the national education landscape without undermining their cultural heritage.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Access and Retention Barriers in Tribal Education:**

Tribal education in India has historically been constrained by multiple structural and socio-cultural barriers. Studies indicate that geographical isolation, poverty, and language differences are major factors leading to poor enrolment and high dropout rates among Scheduled Tribe (ST) children (Xaxa, 2020; Kumar, 2019).

The GOI has recognized these challenges in successive policy reports, emphasizing residential schooling as a mechanism to overcome distance and safety concerns for tribal children (MoTA, 2023).

## **Potential of Residential Schooling**

Residential schooling has been widely discussed as a solution to the problem of educational continuity in marginalized communities. Comparative experiences provide important insights:

**Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNVs):** Established in 1985, these schools demonstrate that talent-nurturing residential education in rural areas can significantly raise achievement levels (Govt. of India, 2019). With free facilities, a CBSE curriculum, and quality teaching, JNVs serve as benchmarks for other residential models.

**Ashram Schools:** Initiated in various tribal states, they combine boarding facilities with cultural anchoring. However, studies have pointed out deficiencies such as poor infrastructure, lack of teacher preparedness, and inadequate integration of tribal languages (Kumar, 2019; Das & Rout, 2021).

**(EMRSs):** Introduced in 1997–98, EMRSs aim to combine the strengths of JNVs (academic rigor, CBSE alignment) with the community sensitivity of Ashram schools (MoTA, 2023). Recent expansions under NESTS envision one EMRS in each tribal-majority block, scaling up to over 700 schools nationwide.

## **Recurrent Challenges Noted in Literature**

Despite opportunities, research consistently highlights challenges:

**Language Transition Gaps:** Most tribal children speak indigenous languages at home but face immediate instruction in Hindi or English in EMRSs. Without bridging support, this leads to comprehension issues (Das & Rout, 2021; Xaxa, 2020).

**Staffing Shortages:** Recruitment and retention of qualified teachers and wardens in remote tribal areas remain difficult. Reports cite high workload due to the residential nature of schools (MoTA, 2023).

**Infrastructural Inequities:** Incomplete hostels, poor sanitation, lack of digital connectivity, and limited emergency health services are recurring issues (Sharma & Singh, 2022).

**Community Engagement:** Parental hesitancy in sending children, particularly girls, to distant hostels continues to limit enrolment. (Rao, 2021).

## **Positive Outcomes of EMRSs**

Literature also points to encouraging impacts:

**Access and Equity:** EMRSs have expanded access to ST children in remote districts (MoTA, 2023).

**Holistic Development:** Integration of sports, arts, and vocational training has broadened opportunities beyond academics (NESTS, 2024).

**Career Aspirations:** EMRS graduates demonstrate higher aspirations for higher education and professional careers compared to peers in government day schools (Rao, 2021).

**Cultural Pride:** By incorporating tribal festivals, arts, and local heritage into schooling, EMRSs help sustain tribal identity alongside modernization (Singh & Meena, 2022).

### Research Gaps

There is a major gap in the literature in studies. There is also a lack of research focusing on gender. In Eklavya Schools the girl children face unique challenges because of the residential schooling and their own cultural uniqueness.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Literature on Tribal Education and EMRSs*

| Author/Source              | Focus Area             | Key Findings   | Opportunities to improve                   |
|----------------------------|------------------------|--|--|
| Xaxa (2020)                | Tribal marginalization | Cultural barriers, low participation                               | Explains why residential models are needed |
| Kumar (2019)               | Ashram schools         | Impact is limited because of the lower availability of facilities. | Lessons for EMRS design                    |
| Govt. of India (2019)      | JNVs & KVs             | Successful rural residential models                                | Provides benchmarks for EMRS               |
| Government of India (2020) | NEP 2020               | Emphasis on equity, inclusion, and multilingualism                 | Policy framework for EMRS                  |
| MoTA (2023)                | Annual Report          | EMRS expansion, challenges in infra/staff                          | Provides official statistics               |
| NESTS (2024)               | EMRS guidelines        | CBSE curriculum, partnerships (AI, skilling)                       | Strengthens opportunity analysis           |
| Das & Rout (2021)          | NEP & tribal education | Language barriers, teacher training gaps                           | Pedagogical challenges                     |
| Sharma & Singh (2022)      | EMRS performance       | Holistic development, governance gaps                              | Evidence on opportunities/challenges       |
| Rao (2021)                 | Student aspirations    | Higher education & career goals among EMRS alumni                  | Positive outcomes                          |
| Singh & Meena (2022)       | Socio-cultural impact  | Confidence, cultural pride   | Links EMRS to heritage preservation        |
| Choudhury (2021)           | Migration & education  | Seasonal migration disrupts learning                               | Justifies residential schooling            |

### Objectives of the Study:

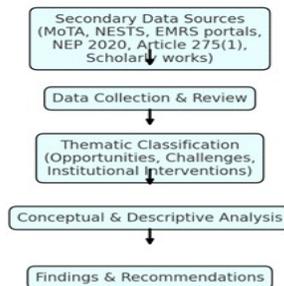
1. Analyse the role of EMRSs in expanding access to quality education for tribal children.
2. Examine the contribution of EMRSs to holistic development (academic, socio-cultural, vocational, sports).

3. Identify implementation challenges faced by EMRSs.
4. Review initiatives of NESTS and MoTA for improving EMRS functioning.

**Methodology:**

The present study adopts a conceptual and descriptive design, focusing on exploring the role of Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs) in empowering tribal students and promoting holistic development. It relies on secondary data sources, including government reports, policy documents, and scholarly works on tribal and inclusive education. The collected data were subjected to thematic analysis under themes of opportunities, challenges, and institutional interventions.

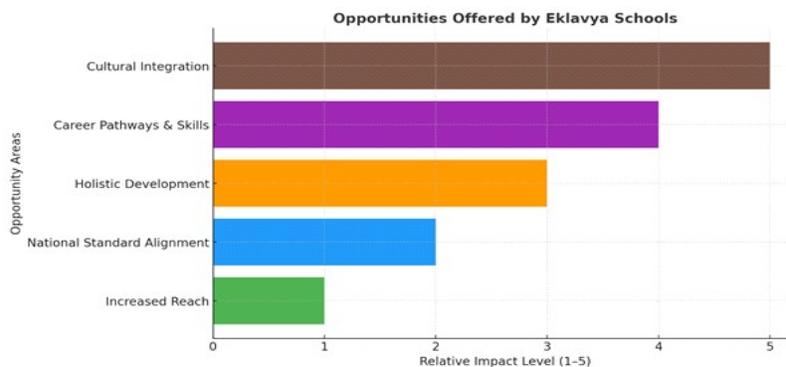
**Research Methodology Flow Diagram**



**Figure-1**

Flow diagram of the research methodology, showing the sequential process from secondary data collection (MoTA, NESTS, EMRS portals, NEP 2020, Article 275(1), and scholarly works) through thematic classification of opportunities, challenges, and institutional interventions, to conceptual and descriptive analysis leading to findings and recommendations.

**Opportunities Offered by Eklavya Schools:**



**Figure 2** Bar diagram Opportunities offered by Eklavya Schools

**Table 2**  
*Opportunities Offered by Eklavya Schools*

| Opportunity Area                            | Description  | Sources  |
|---|--|--|
| Increased Access & Scale                    | Expansion of EMRSs into tribal-majority blocks; residential design removes barriers of distance, safety, and continuity for remote learners.                               | MoTA (2023); NESTS (2024); Choudhury (2021); Xaxa (2020) |
| Quality & Parity with National Systems      | CBSE affiliation ensures standardized curricula and national benchmarking; participation in academic, arts, and sports competitions enhances parity with KVs and JNVs.     | Government of India (2019); Sharma & Singh (2022)        |
| Holistic Development Ecosystem              | Integration of sports infrastructure, health & wellness, counselling, life-skills education, and advanced labs (AI, robotics, AR/VR, electronics) for 21st-century skills. | NESTS (2024); Das & Rout (2021)                          |
| Skill Development & Career Pathways         | Partnerships with industry and training providers; targeted coaching for JEE/NEET/SSC; structured pathways to higher education and employment.                             | MoTA (2023); Rao (2021)                                  |
| Cultural Integration & Identity Affirmation | Inclusion of tribal languages, festivals, art forms, and knowledge systems in school activities; involvement of elders as cultural mentors.                                | Singh & Meena (2022); Xaxa (2020)                        |

**Major Challenges Faced by EMRSs:**

Eklavya Schools (EMRSs) represent a progressive step towards equitable and inclusive education for Scheduled Tribe (ST) learners; however, their effective functioning is hindered by a range of structural, pedagogical, and administrative challenges. These challenges are not only hinder the education quality but also influence access, retention, and holistic development outcomes. A critical examination of these barriers is essential to strengthen the EMRS framework and align it more closely with the objectives of NEP 2020 (MoTA, 2023; Sharma & Singh, 2022).



**Figure 3** Diagram of Challenges Faced by EMRSs

*Major Challenges Faced by EMRSs*

| Challenge Area            | Description  | Sources                                  |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Community Hesitance       | Tribal families often hesitate to send children to distant hostels due to concerns over safety, cultural alienation, and seasonal livelihood migration, affecting continuity of schooling. | Xaxa (2020); Singh & Meena (2022)        |
| Language and Transition   | Mismatch between home languages and school medium of instruction (Hindi/English); limited multilingual materials and bridging mechanisms create learning gaps.                             | Kumar (2019); NEP (2020)                 |
| Governance & Staffing     | Shortage of qualified teachers, wardens, and support staff; heavy workloads in residential settings; lack of clear HR pipelines and coordination between state and central guidelines.     | MoTA (2023); Rao (2021)                  |
| Infrastructure & Services | Gaps in hostel capacity, maintenance, connectivity, and emergency facilities (e.g., hospitals/ambulances); uneven pace and quality of campus completion across states.                     | NESTS (2024); Das & Rout (2021)          |
| Academic Administration   | Confusion from dual affiliations (State Boards vs CBSE) in some schools; many campuses are not fully prepared for CBSE norms (labs, digital systems, documentation).                       | Sharma & Singh (2022); MoTA (2023)       |
| Monitoring & Data Systems | Weak monitoring mechanisms; lack of real-time dashboards, alumni tracking, placement/transition data, and student safety audits across the growing network.                                | NESTS (2024); Government of India (2019) |

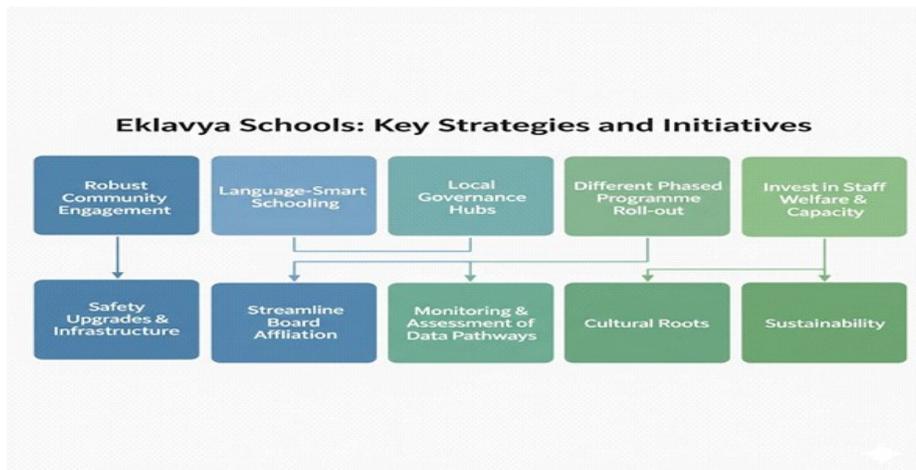
**Discussion:**

The opportunities and challenges facing Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs) are deeply interlinked, requiring careful sequencing and resource alignment for long-term success. While the rapid expansion of EMRSs has significantly increased access for Scheduled Tribe (ST) learners, it also strains staffing, infrastructure, and governance systems if not matched with adequate capacity-building measures. For instance, CBSE alignment enhances parity with national benchmarks but necessitates significant investment in laboratories, teacher training, and pedagogical innovation to ensure that students are not disadvantaged in transition. Similarly, the residential design provides continuity, safety, and structured learning environments, yet it simultaneously creates demands for robust counselling systems, child-protection protocols, and reliable health facilities to safeguard student well-being.

The core theme of the discussion is the balance between harnessing cultural roots and modernization. While Eklavya Schools are visualised as a way for STEM, vocational, and sports excellence, they must also preserve and affirm tribal languages and tribal arts. Embedding multilingual pedagogy, cultural projects, and region-based learning can ensure that modernization does not come at the cost of cultural alienation.

**Suggestions and Recommendations:**

For Eklavya Schools to fully realize their mission of strengthening tribal wards via inclusive and holistic education, a set of planned interventions is needed at multiple levels—community, governance, pedagogy, infrastructure, and sustainability. These recommendations focus on bridging existing gaps while building a strong, culturally rooted, and are ready for future education system.



**Figure-4** Flow chart of the Suggestions and Recommendations

Table 4: Suggestions and Recommendations for Eklavya Schools

| Theme                                    | Key Recommendations  |
|--|--|
| Strengthen Community Engagement          | Community coordinators, hostel open-days, parent–teacher circles, transport for visits, alumni ambassadors.                      |
| Language-Smart Schooling                 | Mother-tongue/multilingual bridge Classes VI–VIII, local language TLMs, trained aides, and gradual transition to English/Hindi.  |
| Local Governance Hubs                    | Local / Regional cluster offices for HR, procurement, training, SOPs with local flexibility.                                     |
| Different Phased Programme Roll-out      | Sequence new labs/sports initiatives after staffing and safety readiness; readiness rubrics for campuses.                        |
| Invest in Staff Welfare & Capacity       | On-campus staff quarters, rotational duty norms, counsellors, induction & CPD, career progression pathways.                      |
| Safety Upgrades & Infrastructure         | Digital connectivity, hostel capacity, campus maintenance, hospital/ambulance MoUs, and grievance redress systems.               |
| Streamline Board Affiliation             | Transition all EMRSs to CBSE, centralized help-desk, and bridge courses for teachers/students.                                   |
| Monitoring & Assessment of Data Pathways | Dashboards for enrolment/attendance/outcomes, alumni tracking, JEE/NEET/NTSE/Khelo India pathways, and career counselling.       |
| Cultural Roots                           | Annual heritage plans, tribal arts/crafts/music clubs, community-led projects, ecology learning, and oral history documentation. |
| Sustainability                           | Campus kitchens sourcing locally, eco-clubs, waste/water management, livelihood-support projects.                                |

## Conclusion

Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs) embody both a transformative opportunity and a formidable challenge in the quest for equitable, inclusive, and holistic education for India's Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. As the review demonstrates, Eklavya Schools have expanded access to quality schooling at an unprecedented scale, offering pathways into higher education, vocational skills, sports, and cultural diversity that were historically inaccessible to many tribal learners. Their CBSE alignment, integration of advanced laboratories, and partnerships for competitive examinations position them as potential models on par with national benchmarks such as Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs) and Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNVs). At the same time, Eklavya Schools are well known themselves for driving in cultural preservation and tribal identity into their educational ethos, reflecting a balance between modernization and heritage.

In alignment with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, EMRSs can evolve into living laboratories of inclusive education if reforms are phased, adequately resourced, and rigorously monitored. Strengthened community engagement, language-smart schooling, regional governance hubs, staff welfare systems, and robust monitoring frameworks are not mere suggestions but necessary conditions for effectiveness. Equally, cultural affirmation, sustainability, and integration with local economies can ensure that EMRSs remain rooted in the lived realities of tribal communities.

Ultimately, Eklavya Schools represent more than an institutional intervention; they are a flaming torch of social justice and empowerment, with the potential to transform tribal education into a space of dignity, aspiration, and opportunity. If the identified challenges are addressed with clarity and commitment, Eklavya Schools can become a replicable model of holistic and inclusive education, reshaping not only the trajectories of ST children but also India's broader educational and social equity landscape.

**Future Research Directions:** While this study provides a conceptual exploration of the opportunities and challenges faced by Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs), there remain significant areas that merit deeper empirical investigation:

**Longitudinal Tracking of Outcomes:** Future research should focus on tracking EMRS alumni over time to assess educational attainment, employability, and socio-economic mobility, offering evidence of the school's long-term impact.

**Comparative Effectiveness Studies:** Comparative analyses between EMRSs, Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNVs), Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs), and

Ashram schools could highlight relative strengths, weaknesses, and transferable best practices in residential schooling.

**Cultural Pedagogy and Identity Outcomes:** There is a need for focused studies on how effectively EMRSs preserve and promote tribal languages, arts, and cultural practices, and how this shapes students' identity, confidence, and community engagement.

**Teacher Preparedness and Pedagogical Practices:** Empirical studies could evaluate teacher training, professional development, and pedagogical strategies within EMRSs to determine their readiness for multilingual, multicultural, and 21st-century competencies.

**Community Perceptions and Engagement Models:** Qualitative research on tribal community perspectives—including parental attitudes, trust in institutions, and cultural concerns—could generate strategies for enhancing participation and reducing hesitance.

**Governance and Policy Effectiveness:** Assessing the effectiveness of governance structures (MoTA, NESTS, state societies) and regional hubs can provide insights into bureaucratic efficiency, accountability, and decentralized decision-making.

**Digital and Vocational Integration:** Studies on the implementation of digital infrastructure, AI/robotics labs, and vocational programmes can help evaluate how well these initiatives translate into real skill development and employability.

**Equity and Inclusion across Regions:** Future research should also examine inter-state variations in EMRS functioning, highlighting disparities in infrastructure, staffing, or cultural adaptation, to inform targeted interventions.

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