



Identity, Cultural Continuity and Assimilation in the Educational Experiences of the Oraon Community in West Bengal

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Abstract:

Education occupies a complex position in the lives of indigenous communities, functioning simultaneously as a means of empowerment and as a vehicle for cultural assimilation. Among the Oraon (Kurukh) community of West Bengal, formal education has introduced new opportunities for social mobility while also posing challenges to the continuity of indigenous identity, language, and cultural practices. This paper explores the dynamics of identity formation, cultural continuity, and assimilation in relation to the educational experiences of the Oraon community in West Bengal. It examines how schooling mediates the interaction between traditional knowledge systems and dominant cultural frameworks, reshaping individual and collective identities across generations. The analysis highlights the ways in which Oraon families negotiate educational participation while attempting to preserve linguistic heritage, ritual practices, and community values. At the same time, it interrogates the pressures exerted by mainstream curricula, language policies, and institutional norms that often marginalize indigenous worldviews. The paper argues that education among the Oraon is not a linear process of cultural loss or integration but a negotiated and dynamic process characterized by hybridity, resistance, and adaptation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing inclusive educational policies that respect cultural diversity while promoting equitable learning outcomes.

Keywords: Oraon Community, Identity, Cultural Continuity, Assimilation, Tribal Education, West Bengal.

Introduction:

Education has long been regarded as a powerful instrument of social transformation, particularly for historically marginalized communities. In the Indian context, formal education has been promoted as a means of addressing social exclusion, poverty, and inequality among Scheduled Tribes. However, education is not a culturally neutral process. It is embedded within specific linguistic, ideological, and institutional frameworks that reflect dominant social values. For indigenous communities such as the Oraon, engagement with formal education often involves negotiating between traditional cultural identities and the assimilative tendencies of mainstream schooling.

The Oraon community, also known as Kurukh, constitutes one of the major tribal groups of eastern India. While their traditional homeland lies in the Chotanagpur plateau, a significant population of Oraon has settled in West Bengal, particularly in the western districts of Purulia and Bankura and the northern tea-garden regions of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, and Darjeeling. These settlements emerged largely due to colonial-era labour migration, which uprooted Oraon families from ancestral territories and placed them within unfamiliar socio-economic and cultural environments. Despite this displacement, the community has retained a strong sense of collective identity grounded in language, clan organization, ritual life, and ecological knowledge.

In contemporary West Bengal, Oraon children increasingly participate in formal schooling systems that are structured around dominant cultural norms, languages, and curricular frameworks. Schools typically operate in Bengali or English, with limited recognition of indigenous languages such as Kurukh. Curriculum content rarely reflects tribal histories, epistemologies, or lived experiences. As a result, education becomes a site where questions of identity, belonging, and cultural survival are actively negotiated.

This paper explores how education shapes and is shaped by the dynamics of identity, cultural continuity, and assimilation among the Oraon community in West Bengal. Rather than viewing education solely as a mechanism of cultural erosion or upliftment, the analysis adopts a nuanced perspective that recognizes education as a contested and negotiated space. It examines how Oraon individuals and families respond to the pressures of assimilation while striving to maintain cultural continuity, and how new hybrid identities emerge at the intersection of tradition and modernity.

Conceptual Framework: Identity, Cultural Continuity, and Assimilation

Identity is a socially constructed and historically situated phenomenon that evolves through interaction with social institutions, cultural practices, and power relations. For indigenous communities, identity is deeply intertwined with collective memory, language, land, and ritual life. Cultural continuity refers to the processes through which a community preserves and transmits its values, knowledge systems, and social practices across generations. Assimilation, in contrast, involves the gradual absorption of minority groups into dominant cultural frameworks, often at the cost of distinct identities.

In the context of education, these concepts intersect in complex ways. Schools function as sites of socialization where dominant cultural norms are transmitted through language, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices. For tribal students, participation in schooling often requires adapting to cultural codes that differ significantly from those of their home environments. This can lead to experiences of alienation, identity conflict, or cultural dissonance.

At the same time, education can also serve as a platform for cultural assertion and empowerment. Literacy and formal knowledge enable indigenous communities to document their histories, advocate for rights, and engage with broader political and social processes. Thus, education does not inevitably lead to cultural loss; rather, its impact depends on how educational systems recognize and engage with cultural diversity.

Among the Oraon of West Bengal, identity formation through education is marked by hybridity. Students often navigate multiple cultural worlds, adopting elements of mainstream culture necessary for social mobility while maintaining connections to tribal traditions. This hybrid identity challenges binary notions of tradition versus modernity and underscores the adaptive strategies employed by indigenous communities in response to changing socio-educational landscapes.

Historical Background of the Oraon Community in West Bengal

The historical experience of the Oraon community in West Bengal provides essential context for understanding contemporary educational dynamics. The large-scale migration of Oraon families into Bengal during the colonial period was primarily driven by labour demands in tea plantations, forestry, and agricultural expansion. Colonial recruitment systems disrupted traditional patterns of land use, social organization, and knowledge transmission, placing Oraon communities in new ecological and cultural settings.

In plantation regions of northern West Bengal, Oraon labourers lived in segregated settlements, often isolated from mainstream village life. Educational facilities in these areas were limited, and schooling was frequently oriented toward basic literacy rather than comprehensive education. In western districts, Oraon settlements were characterized by subsistence agriculture, forest dependence, and minimal state presence. These conditions constrained access to formal education for much of the twentieth century.

Despite these challenges, Oraon communities retained strong cultural institutions. Clan systems regulated marriage and social relations, while rituals and festivals structured communal life. Oral traditions, songs, and dances functioned as repositories of historical memory and moral instruction. Education, in its indigenous form, was embedded in daily activities and collective practices rather than institutional settings.

The post-independence expansion of state schooling gradually increased educational access among the Oraon. However, the legacy of historical marginalization continued to shape educational participation. Schools were often poorly resourced, culturally distant, and linguistically inaccessible. These factors influenced how Oraon families perceived education and its implications for cultural continuity.

Oraon Cultural Identity and Social Organization

Oraon cultural identity is rooted in a holistic worldview that emphasizes harmony between human beings, nature, and the spiritual realm. Social organization is clan-based and patrilineal, with strict rules of clan exogamy that reinforce social cohesion. Community life revolves around shared rituals, festivals, and collective labour, fostering a strong sense of belonging.

Language plays a central role in cultural identity. Kurukh, the mother tongue of the Oraon, carries oral histories, ecological knowledge, and cultural values. Although multilingualism is common due to interaction with neighbouring communities, Kurukh remains a vital marker of identity within families and community spaces. The gradual decline in the use of Kurukh among younger generations has therefore become a source of concern for elders.

Festivals such as Karma, Sohrai, Maghe, and Fagu serve as key sites of cultural transmission. These events involve music, dance, storytelling, and ritual practices that reinforce collective memory and intergenerational bonds. Participation in such festivals provides informal education in social norms, ethical values, and cultural history.

Education intersects with these cultural practices in complex ways. While schooling introduces new temporal routines and value systems, community rituals continue to serve as spaces of cultural continuity. The coexistence of these educational forms illustrates the layered nature of learning in Oraon society.

Education as a Site of Cultural Encounter

For Oraon children in West Bengal, the school represents a primary site of encounter with mainstream culture. Classroom practices, disciplinary norms, and curricular content reflect dominant social values that

may differ from those of the home environment. This encounter often generates tension, particularly when schools fail to recognize or respect indigenous identities.

Language of instruction is a critical factor in this process. The predominance of Bengali or English in schools places Oraon students at an initial disadvantage and reinforces the symbolic dominance of non-tribal culture. Cultural references in textbooks often exclude tribal perspectives, further marginalizing indigenous experiences.

At the same time, schools also provide access to new forms of knowledge and social networks. For many Oraon families, education represents hope for improved livelihoods and social mobility. This dual character of schooling—as both opportunity and challenge—shapes how identity, cultural continuity, and assimilation are negotiated.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Cultural Transmission among the Oraon

Before the widespread penetration of formal schooling, education among the Oraon community was primarily embedded within everyday social life. Learning was not separated from living; rather, it was integrated into work, ritual, and communal interaction. This indigenous mode of education played a crucial role in sustaining cultural continuity, shaping identity, and ensuring the transmission of collective knowledge across generations.

Oraon children traditionally learned through observation, participation, and guided practice. Agricultural activities such as sowing, harvesting, and seed preservation functioned as pedagogical processes through which ecological knowledge and survival skills were transmitted. Forest-based practices—such as identifying edible plants, medicinal herbs, and sacred groves—constituted an important dimension of learning, reinforcing a worldview that emphasized harmony with nature. These forms of learning were experiential, context-specific, and relational rather than abstract or standardized.

Elders occupied a central position in indigenous education. Through storytelling, proverbs, songs, and myths, they conveyed moral values, historical memory, and cultural norms. Oral narratives served as repositories of collective identity, recounting ancestral origins, migration histories, and clan lineages. Such narratives not only transmitted knowledge but also cultivated a sense of belonging and responsibility toward the community. In this way, indigenous education reinforced identity through lived experience rather than formal instruction.

This system of knowledge transmission was deeply interwoven with social organization. Clan-based structures regulated marriage, kinship, and social obligations, while community councils played an educative role by resolving disputes and reinforcing norms. Participation in these institutions socialized young members into collective values such as cooperation, respect for elders, and communal accountability. Education, therefore, was fundamentally social and ethical in orientation.

Language as a Core Marker of Cultural Identity

Language occupies a central place in the cultural continuity of the Oraon community. Kurukh, the mother tongue of the Oraon, functions not merely as a means of communication but as a carrier of cultural memory, worldview, and epistemology. Oral traditions, ritual chants, folk songs, and agricultural knowledge are encoded within the language, making it a crucial medium of identity formation.

Within Oraon households and community spaces, Kurukh continues to be used in everyday interaction, particularly among older generations. However, multilingualism is common due to prolonged interaction with non-tribal populations. Sadri often functions as a link language, while Bengali dominates in public

institutions, markets, and schools. This linguistic hierarchy places Kurukh in a vulnerable position, particularly among younger generations who increasingly associate Bengali and English with education, employment, and upward mobility.

The gradual shift away from Kurukh among school-going children has raised concerns within the community. Elders often perceive this linguistic shift as an indicator of cultural erosion, fearing that loss of language will lead to the disappearance of oral traditions and indigenous knowledge. In response, some families consciously maintain the use of Kurukh at home, viewing it as a form of cultural resistance and continuity.

Language thus becomes a contested site in the educational experience of Oraon children. While mastery of dominant languages is necessary for academic success, the marginalization of Kurukh within formal education creates a tension between educational advancement and cultural preservation. This tension shapes identity formation, particularly during adolescence, when linguistic choices become intertwined with aspirations and self-perception.

Rituals, Festivals, and Informal Education

Rituals and festivals play a vital role in sustaining cultural continuity among the Oraon and function as informal educational spaces. Festivals such as Karma, Sohrai, Maghe, and Fagu are not merely celebratory events; they are pedagogical contexts in which cultural values, social roles, and historical narratives are enacted and reinforced.

Participation in these festivals involves collective preparation, ritual performance, music, dance, and storytelling. Through these activities, young community members learn about clan responsibilities, gender roles, ecological cycles, and moral codes. Songs sung during festivals often recount ancestral stories or express collective aspirations, embedding historical consciousness within aesthetic forms.

Ritual education emphasizes cooperation and collective participation rather than individual achievement. Children learn by observing elders and gradually assuming roles within ritual performances. This mode of learning fosters intergenerational bonding and reinforces continuity by situating individuals within a shared cultural framework.

The temporal rhythm of rituals, aligned with agricultural seasons, also educates children about ecological cycles and sustainable practices. Such knowledge is rarely acknowledged within formal schooling, which tends to privilege abstract and decontextualized content. As a result, indigenous educational practices continue to function alongside formal education, providing an alternative epistemic foundation.

Education Outside Schooling: Community-Based Learning

In addition to rituals, everyday community practices serve as important sites of learning. Collective labour activities, such as house construction, harvesting, or preparation for festivals, involve informal instruction and socialization. These activities teach practical skills as well as values of mutual support and reciprocity.

Community elders, artisans, and farmers act as knowledge bearers, transmitting specialized skills related to agriculture, craftsmanship, and healing. Such forms of learning are adaptive and responsive to local conditions, reflecting a deep understanding of the environment. Education in this sense is holistic, encompassing physical, social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

These community-based learning processes contribute to a strong sense of identity and belonging. They affirm the relevance of indigenous knowledge and validate cultural practices that are often devalued within

formal education. For Oraon children, participation in such learning contexts provides a counterbalance to the assimilative pressures encountered in schools.

Early Encounters with Institutional Education

The initial encounters of the Oraon community with formal schooling were shaped by colonial and missionary interventions. Early schools were often established with limited sensitivity to indigenous culture and language. Instruction focused on basic literacy and moral discipline, frequently framed within religious or administrative objectives rather than community needs.

These early educational interventions disrupted indigenous learning systems by privileging textual knowledge over experiential learning. Schools imposed new temporal routines, disciplinary norms, and value systems that conflicted with traditional ways of life. Attendance often required children to withdraw from agricultural and household responsibilities, creating economic and cultural tensions.

As a result, early perceptions of schooling among the Oraon were ambivalent. While some families recognized the potential benefits of literacy, others viewed schools as alien institutions that undermined cultural autonomy. This ambivalence continues to influence educational participation, particularly in contexts where schools remain culturally distant from community life.

Negotiating Cultural Continuity in the Context of Schooling

Despite these challenges, the Oraon community has actively negotiated its relationship with formal education. Rather than abandoning indigenous practices, many families attempt to balance schooling with cultural continuity. Children attend school during the day and participate in rituals and community activities during evenings or festivals.

In some villages, community-led initiatives aim to reinforce cultural education alongside formal schooling. Storytelling sessions, cultural programs, and language preservation efforts are organized to ensure that younger generations remain connected to their heritage. These initiatives reflect a collective recognition that education need not entail cultural loss if it is accompanied by conscious efforts to preserve identity.

This negotiation process highlights the agency of the Oraon community in shaping educational experiences. Education is not passively absorbed but actively interpreted and adapted. Through everyday practices, families and communities redefine what it means to be educated while remaining Oraon.

Education, Identity, and the Foundations of Assimilation

The dynamics of identity and assimilation begin to take shape in these early educational encounters. As Oraon children navigate between home and school, they encounter divergent cultural expectations. Success in school often requires adopting dominant linguistic and behavioural norms, while cultural belonging within the community requires adherence to indigenous values.

This dual navigation lays the foundation for hybrid identities that are neither entirely traditional nor fully assimilated. These identities are fluid and context-dependent, reflecting the complex interplay between cultural continuity and adaptation. Understanding this foundational stage is essential for analyzing later experiences of assimilation, resistance, and transformation, which will be explored in the subsequent sections.

Formal Schooling and the Dynamics of Cultural Assimilation

As formal schooling expands across tribal regions of West Bengal, it increasingly becomes the primary institutional space where Oraon children encounter dominant cultural norms. Schools are not merely sites of academic instruction; they function as powerful agents of socialization that transmit particular languages, values, and behavioural expectations. For Oraon students, participation in schooling often entails navigating a cultural environment that differs markedly from their home and community contexts.

The structure of formal education privileges standardized curricula, time-bound routines, and assessment-based learning. These features contrast sharply with indigenous modes of learning that are experiential, relational, and flexible. The emphasis on punctuality, individual performance, and competitive achievement introduces new value systems that reshape students' self-perception and social relationships. Over time, these institutional norms influence how Oraon students understand success, discipline, and social mobility.

Language of instruction plays a central role in this assimilative process. Bengali, and increasingly English, dominate classroom communication, textbooks, and examinations. While linguistic proficiency in these languages offers access to broader opportunities, it simultaneously marginalizes Kurukh and other tribal languages. The absence of indigenous languages in formal instruction conveys implicit messages about cultural hierarchy, reinforcing the symbolic dominance of non-tribal identities.

As a result, schooling often becomes a site where cultural assimilation is subtly encouraged. Students who adopt dominant linguistic and behavioural norms are more likely to succeed academically, while those who struggle with language or resist cultural conformity risk marginalization. This dynamic places Oraon students in a position where educational success is frequently associated with distancing oneself from indigenous identity.

Classroom Experiences and Identity Negotiation

Within the classroom, Oraon students engage in continuous processes of identity negotiation. Their experiences are shaped not only by curriculum and language but also by teacher attitudes, peer interactions, and institutional practices. Many Oraon students report feelings of invisibility or misrecognition, particularly when their cultural backgrounds are ignored or misunderstood.

Teachers often lack training in culturally responsive pedagogy and may interpret linguistic hesitation or unfamiliarity with dominant cultural references as indicators of low ability. Such deficit-oriented perceptions can lower expectations and reduce opportunities for meaningful engagement. Over time, repeated experiences of misunderstanding or exclusion can erode students' confidence and sense of belonging.

Peer interactions further complicate identity negotiation. Oraon students studying alongside Bengali peers may encounter subtle forms of stereotyping or social distancing. Differences in accent, dress, or cultural practices can mark tribal students as "other," reinforcing feelings of difference. In response, some students consciously modify their behaviour, language use, or appearance to blend in, adopting dominant cultural markers to avoid stigma.

At the same time, identity negotiation is not uniformly characterized by loss or submission. Many Oraon students develop adaptive strategies that allow them to move between cultural worlds. They may conform to institutional expectations within school while maintaining strong ties to community practices outside. This compartmentalization reflects a pragmatic approach to assimilation, enabling students to pursue education without completely abandoning cultural identity.

Curriculum, Knowledge Hierarchies, and Cultural Exclusion

Curriculum content plays a significant role in shaping educational experiences and identity formation. In West Bengal, school curricula largely reflect mainstream historical narratives, literary traditions, and epistemological frameworks. Tribal histories, philosophies, and contributions are either minimally represented or entirely absent.

This exclusion reinforces hierarchical notions of knowledge, privileging dominant cultural perspectives while devaluing indigenous ways of knowing. For Oraon students, the absence of familiar cultural references can make learning abstract and alienating. When students fail to see their lived realities reflected in textbooks, they may perceive education as disconnected from their own experiences.

Subjects such as history, social science, and language particularly illustrate this disjunction. National and regional narratives often overlook tribal experiences of migration, displacement, and resistance. Literary texts rarely include indigenous voices, limiting opportunities for cultural affirmation. As a result, students may internalize the idea that their community's knowledge and history are less important or legitimate.

This curricular marginalization contributes to a subtle form of assimilation, where cultural invisibility encourages conformity to dominant narratives. However, it also generates spaces for critical reflection. Some Oraon students, especially at higher levels of education, begin to question the absence of tribal perspectives and seek alternative sources of knowledge. This emerging critical consciousness reflects the complex relationship between education and identity.

Parental Perspectives on Education and Cultural Change

Parental attitudes toward education significantly influence how assimilation and cultural continuity are negotiated within families. Oraon parents often view education as essential for their children's economic security and social mobility. At the same time, they express concern about the cultural implications of schooling, particularly the loss of language and traditional values.

Many parents adopt a pragmatic approach, prioritizing education while attempting to preserve cultural practices at home. Speaking Kurukh within the household, encouraging participation in rituals, and maintaining ties to extended family networks are common strategies. Parents thus act as mediators between institutional education and community life, shaping how children interpret and integrate their educational experiences.

However, economic pressures complicate this mediation. Families facing poverty or livelihood insecurity may have limited capacity to support cultural education alongside formal schooling. Migration for work, long school hours, and academic demands reduce opportunities for intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge. In such contexts, assimilation pressures may intensify, particularly for younger generations.

Despite these challenges, parental agency remains significant. Many Oraon parents actively engage with schools, attend meetings, and advocate for their children's education. Their involvement reflects an evolving understanding of education as both a necessity and a site of cultural negotiation.

Resistance, Accommodation, and Hybrid Identities

The educational experiences of Oraon students are characterized by diverse responses to assimilation pressures. Some individuals resist cultural assimilation by maintaining strong identification with indigenous practices and values. This resistance may manifest through continued use of Kurukh, participation in cultural organizations, or engagement in community activism.

Others adopt accommodative strategies, selectively incorporating elements of dominant culture while retaining core aspects of tribal identity. This selective adaptation allows students to navigate institutional expectations without fully relinquishing cultural belonging. Such strategies are particularly evident among students who aspire to higher education or professional careers.

Hybrid identities emerge at the intersection of resistance and accommodation. These identities are dynamic and context-dependent, reflecting the ability of individuals to move between cultural spaces. An Oraon student may identify strongly with tribal heritage in community settings while performing a more assimilated identity in academic or professional environments.

Hybrid identity formation challenges simplistic notions of assimilation as a unidirectional process. Instead, it highlights the agency of Oraon individuals in shaping their educational trajectories and cultural affiliations. Education becomes a site where new forms of identity are constructed, negotiated, and redefined.

Schooling, Social Mobility, and the Politics of Belonging

The promise of social mobility is a powerful motivator for educational participation among the Oraon. Schooling is widely perceived as a pathway to stable employment, social recognition, and improved living conditions. However, the pursuit of mobility often requires conformity to dominant cultural norms, reinforcing assimilation pressures.

As Oraon students progress through the education system, they encounter increasing expectations to align with mainstream identities. Success in competitive examinations, professional environments, and urban contexts often depends on linguistic fluency and cultural familiarity. This reality shapes aspirations and influences identity choices.

At the same time, experiences of discrimination or exclusion can complicate the relationship between education and belonging. Educated Oraon individuals may find themselves marginalized in professional spaces despite academic credentials. Such experiences highlight the limits of assimilation as a strategy for full inclusion and underscore the persistence of structural inequalities.

These contradictions contribute to a nuanced understanding of education's role in identity formation. Education offers opportunities for advancement while simultaneously exposing individuals to new forms of exclusion. Navigating this terrain requires resilience, adaptability, and collective support.

Education as a Site of Transformation and Contestation

Rather than viewing education solely as a mechanism of assimilation, it is important to recognize its potential as a site of transformation and contestation. Education equips Oraon individuals with tools to articulate identity, document cultural heritage, and engage with policy processes. Literate and educated community members often play key roles in cultural preservation initiatives, advocacy, and leadership.

In recent years, some Oraon students and educators have begun to challenge dominant educational narratives by promoting culturally inclusive practices. Efforts to incorporate indigenous history, language, and knowledge into educational spaces reflect a growing awareness of the importance of cultural recognition.

These initiatives, though limited in scale, demonstrate the transformative potential of education when aligned with cultural continuity. They also highlight the need for institutional support to move beyond token inclusion toward meaningful engagement with indigenous epistemologies.

Intergenerational Transformation of Identity through Education

The dynamics of identity, cultural continuity, and assimilation among the Oraon community in West Bengal are most clearly visible when examined across generations. Education has not merely altered individual educational trajectories; it has reshaped family relations, cultural transmission, and collective self-understanding over time. Intergenerational comparison reveals a gradual but significant shift in how education is perceived, experienced, and negotiated within the community.

Older generations of Oraon, particularly those whose formative years preceded the widespread availability of schooling, were socialized primarily through indigenous knowledge systems. Their identities were rooted in clan affiliations, ritual participation, ecological knowledge, and oral traditions. Education, when accessible at all, was peripheral to everyday life and seldom viewed as essential for social participation. Cultural continuity was ensured through lived practice rather than formal instruction.

By contrast, younger generations have grown up in an environment where schooling is increasingly normalized. For many Oraon children today, school attendance is an expected part of childhood, even in remote settlements. This normalization has shifted the locus of learning from community spaces to institutional settings, altering patterns of cultural transmission. While elders continue to impart cultural knowledge, the time available for intergenerational interaction has diminished due to academic schedules, migration, and changing livelihoods.

These changes have implications for identity formation. Educated youth often develop identities that are more individualized and future-oriented, shaped by aspirations for mobility and professional success. This orientation can generate tension with elders who emphasize collective values and cultural continuity. However, such tensions do not necessarily signify cultural rupture. Rather, they reflect a process of adaptation in which new identities are negotiated in response to changing social conditions.

Importantly, intergenerational transformation is uneven. Families with sustained educational engagement often develop strategies to integrate schooling with cultural preservation, while those facing persistent poverty or disruption experience greater challenges. Addressing this unevenness is essential for ensuring that education supports cultural continuity rather than exacerbating inequality.

Assimilation, Resistance, and the Politics of Cultural Survival

The relationship between education and assimilation among the Oraon community is neither linear nor uniform. While formal schooling introduces assimilative pressures, it also creates spaces for resistance and reinterpretation. Assimilation is often experienced subtly, through language shift, curricular exclusion, and normative expectations, rather than through overt coercion. These processes can gradually reshape cultural practices and self-identification.

Resistance to assimilation takes multiple forms. At the individual level, some students consciously maintain indigenous language use and cultural participation, asserting their identity within and beyond educational spaces. At the community level, cultural organizations, festivals, and informal learning initiatives serve as sites of resistance by reaffirming collective memory and practice. These forms of resistance demonstrate that cultural survival is an active and ongoing process.

Accommodation represents another response, where individuals selectively adopt elements of dominant culture while preserving core aspects of tribal identity. This strategy allows Oraon students to navigate educational institutions effectively without fully relinquishing cultural belonging. Accommodation is

particularly evident among students pursuing higher education or professional careers, who often move between cultural contexts with relative ease.

These varied responses challenge simplistic narratives of assimilation as inevitable or totalizing. Instead, they underscore the agency of the Oraon community in shaping educational outcomes and identity trajectories. Education becomes a field of negotiation where cultural continuity and change coexist.

Education, Cultural Continuity, and Community Agency

Community agency plays a crucial role in mediating the impact of education on cultural continuity. Oraon families and community leaders actively engage with educational institutions, advocating for resources while seeking to protect cultural practices. This engagement reflects an evolving understanding of education as both a necessity and a site of cultural contestation.

Community-led initiatives aimed at language preservation, cultural education, and youth engagement illustrate the proactive role of the community. Storytelling sessions, cultural performances, and informal language classes complement formal schooling and provide alternative spaces for learning. These initiatives help bridge the gap between institutional education and indigenous knowledge systems.

Educated members of the community often emerge as cultural brokers, facilitating dialogue between schools and communities. Their ability to navigate institutional frameworks enables them to advocate for culturally responsive practices and greater recognition of indigenous perspectives. This brokerage role highlights the transformative potential of education when aligned with community priorities.

However, sustaining community agency requires institutional support. Without recognition and resources, community initiatives remain fragile and limited in scope. Educational policies must therefore move beyond access and incorporate mechanisms that empower communities to shape educational content and practice.

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

The analysis of identity, cultural continuity, and assimilation in the educational experiences of the Oraon community in West Bengal has several implications for educational policy and practice.

First, education must be culturally responsive. Curriculum design should include indigenous histories, languages, and knowledge systems, enabling students to see their identities reflected in educational content. Such inclusion affirms cultural legitimacy and enhances engagement.

Second, language policy requires careful attention. Mother-tongue-based multilingual education in the early years can facilitate comprehension, reduce alienation, and support language preservation. Gradual transition to regional and national languages should be supported rather than imposed.

Third, teacher preparation is critical. Educators working in tribal contexts must be trained in culturally sensitive pedagogy and encouraged to value indigenous knowledge. Stable teacher postings and community engagement can strengthen trust and continuity.

Fourth, community participation should be institutionalized. Mechanisms that enable communities to contribute to school governance, curriculum adaptation, and cultural programming can enhance relevance and accountability.

Finally, education must be linked to meaningful opportunities for social mobility. Aligning education with skill development and employment pathways can reduce frustration and ensure that aspirations are matched by realistic outcomes.

Conclusion

The educational experiences of the Oraon community in West Bengal reveal a complex interplay between identity, cultural continuity, and assimilation. Education has opened pathways for empowerment, social mobility, and civic engagement, while simultaneously introducing pressures that challenge indigenous language, knowledge, and practices. These dynamics are not reducible to simple narratives of loss or progress; they are negotiated through everyday practices, intergenerational relationships, and community agency.

Oraon individuals and families actively navigate educational spaces, adopting strategies of resistance, accommodation, and hybridity. Cultural continuity persists through language use, ritual participation, and community-based learning, even as schooling reshapes identities and aspirations. The emergence of hybrid identities reflects the adaptive capacity of the community and challenges binary oppositions between tradition and modernity.

For education to serve as a genuine instrument of inclusion, it must respect cultural diversity and support indigenous agency. Policies that recognize and integrate indigenous knowledge, promote linguistic inclusion, and engage communities as partners can transform education from a site of assimilation into a space of cultural affirmation. In doing so, education can contribute not only to individual advancement but also to the sustainable preservation of cultural heritage.

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