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## **DISPLACED LEARNING: COLONIAL DISRUPTION AND EDUCATIONAL FUTURES OF TRIBAL COMMUNITIES IN MALABAR (KERALA)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Kurichiya, Paniya, Adiyar, and Cholanaiyan tribal groups in Malabar, Kerala, have a rich history of ecological cooperation, self-sufficient economies, and indigenous knowledge systems. They lived in densely forested areas and practiced shifting farming, forest-based livelihoods, and communal living methods. However, their autonomy was undermined by colonial actions in the 18th century, leading to uprooting, denied access to woods, and disruption of indigenous learning contexts due to British-imposed forest laws, plantation economies, and land tax systems. This study evaluates the long-term inequalities in access, literacy, and educational equality that resulted from colonial disruption, which caused indigenous groups in Malabar to lose their educational continuity. The study emphasizes the cultural alienation brought about by mainstream curriculum and the marginalization of indigenous groups in state education programs, drawing on oral histories, archival documents, and current statistics. Educational achievements are still disproportionately low despite post-independence governmental efforts like tribal welfare programs and the NEP 2020 framework. This is because of things like poverty, lack of culturally suitable teaching,*



*language hurdles, and neglected infrastructure. The research promotes a rethought, culturally grounded approach to tribal education that reinforces identity, restores dignity, and guarantees participatory growth by charting the course of educational dislocation and recovery. By highlighting the pressing need to decolonize pedagogy and integrate indigenous knowledge into Kerala's mainstream educational system, this essay adds to the conversation on inclusive education.*

**Keywords:** Colonial Displacement, Malabar Tribes, Indigenous Knowledge, Forest Policies, Cultural Alienation, Tribal Literacy, Wayanad

## INTRODUCTION

Kerala's tribal people, notably those in the Malabar region—which includes Wayanad, Nilambur, Palakkad, and nearby forest zones—are among the oldest residents of the Indian subcontinent(Sreehari & Kasi, 2025). Ethnographic and historical evidence indicate that they existed long before established kingdoms or structured agricultural civilizations emerged(Wells & Stock, 2020). These societies, which included the Kurichiyas, Paniyas, Adiyans, Kattunaikkans, and Cholanaikkans, developed unique cultural and social systems that were profoundly rooted in forest ecology and sustainable living(Sumathi, 2023). Oral traditions, spiritual beliefs focused on nature, and collaborative decision-making were the foundation of their culture(Edward & Kumar, 2017). Their knowledge systems, passed down through songs, rituals, and community activities, served as both educational and survival tactics in complicated forest settings(Malhotra, 2024).



The tribal way of life was distinctively non-hierarchical, inclusive, and communitarian (Bori, 2023). Land was not privately owned, but rather collaboratively managed; knowledge was openly shared and integrated into daily chores (Shanmugam et al., 2020). Health care, agriculture, architecture, and justice were all managed utilizing indigenous systems that evolved over time (Mary & Yamakanamardi, 2019). Education was informal, relying on observation, participation, and storytelling rather than written teaching. The forest served as both classroom and textbook (Rogoff et al., 2016). Tribal life was not "illiterate" in this sense, but rather practiced another sort of literacy—ecological, experiential, and moral. This organic system of life and learning, however, was severely disrupted by colonial modernity (Damodaran, 2006). Beginning in the 18th century and progressing through the 19th and early twentieth centuries, British colonization transformed Malabar's material and cultural landscape (Yoganandham, 2014). Forests were designated state property via statutes such as the Madras Forest Act (1882), forcing tribes to abandon ancestral grounds (Basu & Damodaran, 2015). Large-scale plantations, land revenue schemes, and new legal-administrative borders devastated indigenous tribes' subsistence economies (Kumar, 2022). Simultaneously, colonial education systems, which focused on alien languages, values, and hierarchies, made indigenous knowledge systems invalid or worthless (Pratheesh, 2024). Displacement, marginalization, and the extinction of indigenous educational ecosystems ensued (Shah & Lerche, 2020).

Even after India won independence, the indigenous groups of Kerala were mainly excluded from mainstream educational advancement (James, 2022). While the state has one of the highest literacy rates in the country, tribal literacy falls far behind, particularly among



women and remote tribal communities(Mathew, 2019). Despite their good intentions, post-independence development projects frequently failed to take into consideration these communities' particular socio-cultural environment(Raghavan et al., 2022). Language obstacles, foreign curriculum, a lack of representation on teaching personnel, and infrastructure deficiencies further alienated indigenous youngsters from formal education(Isac, 2011). Policies frequently saw tribal populations as passive recipients rather than active agents of knowledge and development(S. Kumar & Indu, 2021).

This investigation arose from the pressing necessity to review the educational past and current reality of Kerala's indigenous tribes through a critical and contextualized lens. It investigates how colonial disruption replaced indigenous learning and how current education policy continues to suppress tribal perspectives. It identifies the systemic issues that tribal learners experience, such as cultural dissonance, infrastructural neglect, and pedagogical alienation, and provides an inclusive, contextual, and empowering educational perspective. The study underscores the importance of reframing education as a dynamic, culturally sensitive process, rather than a one-size-fits-all one. It adds to the discussion on decolonizing education and recognizing the epistemic legitimacy of tribal knowledge systems. By focusing on Malabar tribal communities, it hopes to discover hidden stories of resilience and signpost to egalitarian futures for India's indigenous students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Kerala's tribal communities have experienced significant disruptions due to colonial land dispossession, forest regulation, and epistemic marginalization, leading to severe



educational lag, systemic alienation, and intergenerational trauma. Despite constitutional guarantees and state interventions, tribal education in Malabar remains high, with language exclusion and culturally irrelevant curricula. The research aims to understand how colonial disruptions have reshaped these communities' educational experiences and assess how contemporary schooling either perpetuates or challenges this historical displacement. The study aims to trace colonial and postcolonial policies that disrupted indigenous education, examine current challenges and aspirations within selected tribal settlements, and identify pathways for culturally responsive, inclusive, and sustainable educational futures. The study uses a qualitative and historically grounded approach, focusing on tribal voices, lived experiences, and systemic patterns of marginalization.

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative research methodology backed by ethnographic methodologies and historical-documentary analysis, which is appropriate for investigating the multifaceted reality of tribal education systems disturbed by colonial and postcolonial frameworks. The research focuses on studying the subjective experiences, cultural dynamics, and institutional connections that influence indigenous populations' educational journeys in Kerala's Malabar area. The study focuses on the historical displacement of indigenous education systems and the contemporary challenges faced by tribal learners. A multi-method qualitative approach was used, including historical-documentary analysis, field-based ethnographic observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. The study was conducted across three districts in northern Kerala with significant tribal populations, Wayanad, Malappuram, and Palakkad.



Purposive sampling was used to identify settlements and schools with high tribal enrolment and noticeable dropout patterns, while snowball sampling was used to reach elders and oral historians within the tribal communities. Data sources included interviews, field notes, oral testimonies, FGDs, and observational data. Thematic content analysis was used to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and narratives from transcribed interviews and field notes. NVivo software was used for coding and organizing the data under major themes: historical displacement, linguistic alienation, cultural exclusion, gender disparities, and community resilience. Triangulation was maintained across documentary, oral, and observational data to ensure credibility and contextual consistency. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to fieldwork, and informed consent was secured from all participants to ensure anonymity and cultural sensitivity throughout the process.

## **ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION**

### **Historical Background – Colonial Disruptions and Loss of Traditional Knowledge Systems**

The impact of colonialism on indigenous cultures is profound and multifaceted (Brodowicz, 2024). The historical process involved territorial occupation, foreign governance, economic systems, and cultural norms, leading to the erosion of indigenous languages, religions, and social structures (Chandrasekhar et al., 2001). This has resulted in socio-economic disparities and ongoing struggles for cultural preservation and social justice. Forced assimilation policies aimed to erase indigenous identities, resulting in population declines and loss of connection to ancestral lands (Parkash, 2025). Despite these challenges,



indigenous communities have demonstrated resilience and continue to resist cultural erasure. The ongoing struggles for cultural revitalization and self-determination reflect a commitment to reclaiming rights to land, language, and cultural practices.

Malabar's tribal groups, including the Kurichiyas, Kurumbas, Paniyas, and Cholanaikkans, have long coexisted peacefully with the area's rich forest ecosystems. Their belief systems, farming methods, sociocultural systems, and learning styles were all intricately woven into the natural world and were maintained through ceremonial acts, oral traditions, and intergenerational knowledge. A unique epistemology that valued collective memory, ecological balance, and spiritual continuity over written codification was formed by this complex interaction between people and land (Brunner, 2020). However, the arrival of British colonial control in the late 18th and early 19th centuries permanently changed this balance (Pouchepadass, 1995). The British East India Company solidified its control over the Malabar region with the Treaty of Seringapatam in 1792 and the subsequent overthrow of Tipu Sultan in 1799 (Swai, 1979). Tribal life and educational institutions were severely disrupted in the decades that followed as a result of the colonial administrative and economic systems being imposed.

The colonial reinterpretation of land and forest ownership was one of the first and most significant upheavals. New forest legislation, such as the Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1882, categorized tribal lands—once communally administered and interlaced with indigenous resource use—as state-owned (Kunhikrishnan, 1998). Traditional tribal rights to use woods for grazing, shifting agriculture, or subsistence were restricted by these legal



documents. Once validated by decades of lived experience, customary knowledge was diminished to "privileges" that colonial rulers could take away whenever they pleased. Colonial forest management plans brought about a new stage of ecological and cultural upheaval, particularly in resource-rich areas like Nilambur and Wayanad. Tribal populations were uprooted from their ancestral grounds and pushed into labour systems that ignored their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) as a result of the commercial extraction of teak, rosewood, and other important woods. In Wayanad alone, more than 132,000 acres had been turned into protected forests by 1908, eliminating native stewardship and limiting customs like seed storage, the use of herbal remedies, and seasonal land rotation.

This disruption is shown by the Kurichiyas, who are renowned for their proficiency in archery and community-led cooperative farming. Their protection of land, autonomy, and traditional educational institutions served as the foundation for their active involvement in resistance actions, particularly the Pazhassi Revolts and the Kurichiya Rebellion of 1812. Tribal epistemologies were rapidly eroded as a result of British punitive measures including forced labour, property seizure, and cultural repression that followed these uprisings. The education system that British power brought with it marginalized indigenous methods of learning while promoting Eurocentric knowledge as its roots grew. Missionary schools and subsequently government-sponsored establishments turned into instruments of absorption, delegitimizing the indigenous people's language, customs, and histories. Tribal knowledge was purposefully framed as outdated, useless, or unscientific by the colonial educational system, which did more than just ignore it.



In fact, colonialism in Malabar was a twofold process of material deprivation and cognitive erasure. Tribal tribes lost not just their lands, but also their knowledge systems—the songs, stories, medical practices, agricultural techniques, and spiritual rites that defined their unique identity. Understanding this colonial heritage is critical for creating educational futures that honour, rather than obliterate, indigenous epistemologies.

### **Tribal Resistance and Identity: The Educational Undercurrents of Assertion and Survival**

The marginalization of tribal communities in Malabar under colonial rule led to the dismantling of their traditional knowledge systems and ecological foundations. However, resistance emerged through the preservation of cultural identity, oral traditions, and indigenous learning. Tribal groups like the Kurichiyas exemplified a legacy of resistance, focusing on land, dignity, and epistemic recognition. Their defiance laid the groundwork for reclaiming educational spaces, demonstrating that education is not just about access to institutions but also about preserving the right to define what counts as knowledge.

The tribal communities of Malabar have been a subject of ongoing resistance against colonial erasure, with land dispossession and the dismantling of indigenous knowledge systems being central to British policies. Education for these communities has historically been embedded in ritual, performance, agriculture, and collective memory. However, colonial incursions sought to erase these forms, leading to epistemic resistance. The Kurichiya community, for example, fought against British forces to protect their territorial rights and



cultural autonomy. Their knowledge of terrain, herbal medicine, and martial strategy was passed down orally as a form of indigenous pedagogy.

Despite this oppression, tribal identities evolved with resilience. Communities preserved their traditions through ceremonial rituals, oral narratives, and rites of passage, which often doubled as sites of learning. Death customs, rich in symbolic action and communal participation, served both spiritual and pedagogical functions. Language and cultural preservation also manifested, with many tribal dialects flourishing through community storytelling and folk performance. Educational practices were embedded in song cycles, dance forms, and seasonal agricultural tasks, each rooted in a deep understanding of the forest and its rhythms.

Women in tribal communities played a crucial role in resisting epistemic marginalization, transmitting education and identity through caregiving, spirituality, and environmental wisdom. Modern tribal assertion movements in Kerala draw from this legacy of knowledge-centered resistance, advocating for educational rights and curriculum inclusion of tribal history and worldview. Thus, tribal resistance in Malabar must be seen not only in terms of land or rebellion but as a deep-seated educational struggle.

### **Resilience and Reform: Educational Challenges and Emerging Prospects**

Colonial interventions destroyed tribal communities' traditional knowledge systems, leaving a culturally rooted, orally transmitted, and ecologically contextualized learning tradition. This has led to an alienating system that often misaligns with tribal realities. To understand this disruption and find meaningful alternatives, it's crucial to examine the current

educational profile of these communities. This segment explores structural challenges, emerging prospects, and strategic opportunities in tribal education across Malabar, emphasizing the transformative potential of context-sensitive educational interventions.

Table 1: Profile of Tribal Communities (Primary Source)

Community	Population	Gender Ratio	Language Spoken	Cultural Practices
Kurichiya	20,000	1:1.2	Tribal Malayalam	Traditional agriculture, hunting, and gathering practices are central to their lifestyle, reflecting their connection to the land and resources <sup>1</sup> .
Kurumba	15,000	1:1.1	Kurumba	Known for their rich oral traditions and rituals, they maintain a close-knit community structure <sup>1</sup> .
Paniya	30,000	1:1.3	Paniya	Engage in agriculture and have unique cultural practices that emphasize community cooperation <sup>1</sup> .
Adiyan	10,000	1:1.4	Tribal Malayalam	Their cultural identity is closely tied to their traditional practices and rituals, often centered around nature <sup>1</sup> .
Kattunayakan	8,000	1:1.5	Tribal Malayalam	Primarily forest dwellers, they practice hunting and gathering, with a strong emphasis on their spiritual connection to the forest <sup>1</sup> .
Cholanayikan	5,000	1:1.2	Tribal Malayalam	Their lifestyle includes traditional farming and unique rituals that celebrate their heritage <sup>1</sup> .
Chetti	12,000	1:1.3	Tribal Malayalam	Known for their trade and agricultural practices, they have a rich cultural heritage that includes various festivals <sup>1</sup> .

The Paniya and Cholaanayikan tribal groups have varying population sizes, with the Paniya community having the largest population at 30,000 members and the Cholaanayikan



community at 5,000. These differences may be due to historical factors, migration patterns, resource availability, and social structures. Gender ratios show a slight imbalance, with most communities having a higher number of males than females. Language diversity is prevalent, with the Kurumba community speaking their own language. Each tribe has unique cultural practices reflecting their connection to land and resources. The Kurumba community is known for its rich oral traditions and close-knit structure, which contributes to the preservation of their cultural practices and social cohesion. The Chetti community is known for its trade and agricultural practices, indicating a more economically diverse lifestyle. The emphasis on traditional practices and rituals highlights the importance of cultural heritage in shaping their identities. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for supporting their rights and promoting cultural preservation efforts in contemporary society.

Table 2: Educational Challenges of Tribal Communities

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>Description</b>
Displacement and Loss of Livelihood	Colonial forest policies and commercial plantations displaced tribal populations, undermining traditional education systems (oral transmission, cultural rites)
Restricted Access to Land and Forests	Legal interventions (Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, 1882) denied forest-dwelling communities' access to traditional learning spaces
Cultural Alienation	Mainstream curricula ignore tribal languages, knowledge systems, and histories
Economic Poverty	Most tribal communities live below poverty line, limiting their access to schooling infrastructure and resources
Language Barriers	Medium of instruction in Malayalam/English excludes non-literate or first-generation learners from tribal backgrounds
Infrastructural Deficits	Lack of schools in remote tribal areas, absence of tribal teachers, poor sanitation and health support
Dropout Rates	High dropout due to seasonal migration, lack of motivation, and perceived irrelevance of curriculum



The displacement of tribal populations due to colonial forest policies and commercial plantations has significantly impacted traditional education systems, affecting the oral transmission of knowledge and cultural rites. Legal interventions have restricted access to land and forests, limiting educational opportunities and severing tribal connections to the land. The mainstream educational curricula often ignore tribal languages, knowledge systems, and histories, leading to cultural alienation and erosion of tribal identities. Economic poverty limits access to schooling infrastructure and resources, and language barriers, such as Malayalam or English, exclude non-literate or first-generation learners from tribal backgrounds. Infrastructural deficiencies, such as lack of schools and inadequate sanitation and health support, further hinder access to quality education. High dropout rates among tribal students are attributed to seasonal migration, lack of motivation, and perceived irrelevance of the curriculum. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy changes, community engagement, and the integration of tribal knowledge systems into the curriculum.

Table 3: Educational Indicators of Major Tribal Communities

<b>Tribe</b>	<b>Literacy Rate (%)</b>	<b>School Dropout Rate (%)</b>	<b>Access to Primary School</b>	<b>Access to Secondary School</b>
Kurichiya	74%	38%	Yes	Partial
Paniya	42%	67%	Partial	No
Adiyan	49%	60%	Yes	No
Cholanaikan	25%	80%	No	No

The Kurichiya tribe has the highest literacy rate at 74%, while the Cholanaikan tribe has the lowest at 25%. This disparity reflects the impact of colonialism on education systems,



as foreign education often sought to "civilize" Indigenous children. The Cholanaikan tribe has the highest school dropout rate at 80%, indicating challenges in retaining students in the educational system. Access to primary schools is limited for the Kurichiya, Adiyan, and partially for the Paniya tribes, while the Cholanaikan tribe lacks access entirely. Socio-economic factors play a significant role in educational outcomes, with low literacy rates and high dropout rates among the Paniya and Cholanaikan tribes suggesting that economic poverty may hinder educational access and retention. The high dropout rates, particularly in the Cholanaikan tribe, may be indicative of cultural disconnection from the educational content being provided. The varying levels of access to primary and secondary education across these tribes highlight the need for targeted educational reforms to address the unique challenges faced by tribal communities.

Table 4: Educational Prospects and Opportunities

<b>Opportunity</b>	<b>Strategic Importance</b>
Multilingual Education	Integration of tribal dialects and mother tongues in early schooling stages
Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	Curriculum incorporating tribal heritage, folklore, ecological knowledge
Community-Based Schooling	Local hiring of teachers, education centres run by tribal leaders or NGOs
Scholarships & Residential Schools	Enhanced state support through tribal welfare residential schools (Ashram Schools) and scholarships for higher education
ICT Integration	Use of mobile digital classrooms, radios, and community digital literacy programs in tribal hamlets
Policy Inclusion	NEP 2020's emphasis on equitable and inclusive education must be operationalized to address specific tribal contexts
Gender Focus	Encourage tribal girl child education with incentives, role models, and community



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The study emphasizes the importance of incorporating indigenous cultures, languages, and community structures in education to foster a sense of identity and belonging among indigenous students. It highlights the need for multilingual education, culturally responsive pedagogy, community-based schooling, scholarships, and ICT integration to improve access to education and mitigate socio-economic disparities created by colonial systems. Multilingual education involves integrating tribal dialects and mother tongues in early schooling stages, fostering a sense of belonging among indigenous students. Culturally responsive pedagogy incorporates tribal heritage, folklore, and ecological knowledge into the curriculum, enhancing engagement and relevance for students. Community-based schooling empowers communities and ensures cultural relevance.

State support through tribal welfare residential schools and scholarships for higher education is vital for improving access to education and mitigating socio-economic disparities. ICT integration, such as mobile digital classrooms, radios, and community digital literacy programs, can bridge the educational gap caused by geographical isolation. Policy inclusion in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 must address specific tribal contexts, reflecting the unique needs of tribal populations. Encouraging education for tribal girl children through incentives, role models, and community engagement is essential for promoting gender equity. The study underscores the need for tailored educational strategies that respect and incorporate indigenous cultures, languages, and community structures,



ultimately fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape for tribal populations.

## DISCUSSION

### **Tribal Resistance and Identity in Education**

The marginalization of tribal communities in Malabar under colonial rule has profoundly impacted their traditional knowledge systems and ecological foundations. As highlighted in the research, the resistance of these communities, particularly the Kurichiyas, exemplifies a legacy of defiance focused on land, dignity, and epistemic recognition. Their struggle underscores that education transcends mere access to institutions; it encompasses the right to define what constitutes knowledge itself. This assertion aligns with the findings that colonial interventions dismantled indigenous knowledge systems, leading to a significant cultural and educational disruption.

The historical context reveals that tribal education was deeply embedded in ritual, performance, and collective memory, which colonial policies sought to erase. The Kurichiya community's resistance against British forces to protect their territorial rights and cultural autonomy illustrates the importance of indigenous knowledge, such as their understanding of terrain and herbal medicine, which was transmitted orally as a form of indigenous pedagogy. This form of education, rooted in the community's lived experiences, contrasts sharply with the mainstream educational systems that often ignore tribal languages and histories, leading to cultural alienation.



Despite the oppressive colonial legacy, tribal identities have evolved with remarkable resilience. The preservation of traditions through ceremonial rituals and oral narratives serves both spiritual and educational functions, reinforcing the community's connection to their heritage. The educational practices embedded in song cycles, dance forms, and seasonal agricultural tasks reflect a profound understanding of the environment and its rhythms, which are crucial for sustaining their cultural identity.

Moreover, the role of women in these communities has been pivotal in resisting epistemic marginalization. Women have historically transmitted education and identity through caregiving, spirituality, and environmental wisdom, which is essential for the survival of tribal knowledge systems. Modern tribal assertion movements in Kerala draw from this legacy, advocating for educational rights and the inclusion of tribal history and worldviews in curricula. The current educational profile of tribal communities reveals significant challenges, including high dropout rates and limited access to quality education. For instance, the Cholanaikan tribe exhibits an alarming dropout rate of 80%, indicating a disconnection from the educational content provided. This situation is exacerbated by socio-economic factors, as many tribal communities live below the poverty line, limiting their access to educational resources and infrastructure.

Emerging prospects for tribal education emphasize the need for context-sensitive interventions. The integration of multilingual education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and community-based schooling can enhance educational access and relevance for tribal students. For example, incorporating tribal dialects and ecological knowledge into the curriculum



fosters a sense of belonging and identity among indigenous learners. Additionally, state support through scholarships and residential schools is vital for improving educational outcomes and addressing socio-economic disparities created by colonial systems.

## CONCLUSION

This study critically explored how colonial disturbances irreversibly affected the educational trajectories of Malabar tribal groups, changing environmentally anchored, orally transmitted knowledge systems into marginalized and frequently erased epistemologies. The findings highlight that tribal societies such as the Kurichiyas, Paniyas, Adiyans, and Cholanaikkans did not lack education, but rather practiced a distinct, deeply rooted, and comprehensive form of learning—one that colonial frameworks failed to acknowledge or respect.

British policies, particularly forest legislations and plantation economies, have historically marginalized indigenous tribes, denying them access to traditional learning spaces and systematically criminalizing indigenous practices. This has led to a shift in education from an organic community process to a bureaucratic imposition that excludes tribal language, memory, and identity. Despite this, tribal resistance and resilience have been evident, with communities preserving their epistemologies through oral traditions, spiritual rituals, ecological practices, and even armed revolts. Women have played a crucial role in transmitting knowledge through caregiving and environmental stewardship. Present-day challenges include high dropout rates, access to secondary education, and literacy disparities.



However, emerging educational prospects, such as multilingual education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and community-led schooling, offer potential pathways towards equity.

All things considered, the study confirms that education for indigenous people has to go beyond access and tackle more profound problems of curriculum reform, cultural acknowledgment, and epistemic fairness. We must recognize the validity of tribal methods of knowing and decanter hegemonic paradigms in order to ensure an inclusive educational future. India's educational system can only achieve its goals of fairness, justice, and universal empowerment by integrating pedagogy with local histories, identities, and ambitions.

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