

EMPOWERING RATHWA TRIBES IN KAWANT: UPANISHADIC ROOTS TO CONTEMPORARY EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This research article explores the educational of the Rathwa tribe in Kawant Taluka in the Chhota Udaipur district of Gujarat, India. The study delves into the historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors influencing the educational development of the Rathwas, considering the impact of pluralism, Upanishadic principles, colonial-era policies, and post-independence reforms. The article critically examines the relevance of Upanishadic educational principles to the tribal communities and analyzes the effects of colonial interventions. It also highlights post-independence educational reforms, government policies, and programs aimed at uplifting tribal education. The research identifies contemporary challenges faced by the Rathwa tribe in acquiring education and assesses the success stories and advancements achieved in recent years. The article concludes by emphasizing the transformative power of education on Rathwa society, celebrating achievements, acknowledging challenges, and underscoring the continued importance of educational initiatives.

Keywords: Rathwa tribe, Upanishadic principles, transformative education, holistic learning.

India, celebrated for its pluralism, embodies a tapestry of diverse cultures, religions, languages, and social groups. This rich mosaic extends to its geographical features, encompassing expansive hinterlands, rugged terrains, dense forests, and fertile coastal belts, alongside the Indo-Gangetic plains. This diversity, however, brings about a stratified social fabric, where economic opportunities are distributed along lines of caste and class. Agriculture, the predominant occupation for three-quarters of the Indian population, further reflects the intricate relationship between ecology and livelihoods

Within this diverse mosaic, Tribal communities, thriving in secluded highlands and forests, cultivate a rich tapestry of their own. The Rathwa tribe, an integral part of Indian society, occupies a distinctive position with its profound connection to the land, forests, and a robust sense of self-identity. The Rathwa tribe in Kawant emerges as a unique thread, interwoven with distinctive identities, ecologies, and traditions. As I embark on my research journey, focusing on the impact of academic achievement on the mental health of the Rathwa tribe, it becomes imperative to recognize the transformative power of education.

Since ancient times India was a pioneer in the field of education¹. We can find many examples of traditional education in our Puranas and Upanishads. Education is the cornerstone of societal structure since the time of the Upanishads, has played a pivotal role in shaping the four varnas, emphasizing both Vedic knowledge and practical skills aligned with their respective services. In this context, the exploration of education's role, from elementary to advanced levels, takes center stage as a unifying force capable of bridging disparities, unlocking individual potential, and contributing significantly to the collective well-being of these communities. This research seeks to delve into the nuanced dynamics of education's transformative influence, echoing the ancient wisdom while addressing contemporary challenges faced by the Rathwa tribe in Kawant.

RATHWA TRIBE

The term 'tribe,' originating from the Latin word 'tribes' denoting the 'poor or the masses,' emerged in the sixteenth century in the English language¹. It signifies a community claiming descent from a common ancestor, forming an autonomous unit, and embodying a self-contained society. A tribe, characterized by a common language, uniform social rules, and collaborative efforts for purposes like trade or agriculture, typically shares a

¹ <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/in-sync-with-nature-280229>

common name, territory, culture, and tradition of descent. Unfortunately, their social deprivation is mirrored in educational backwardness.

In Gujarat's tribal belt, spanning districts like Surat, Baroda, Panchmahal, Sabarkantha, and Banaskantha, diverse tribes such as Koli, Siddhi, Rabari, Bhils, Ahirs, Bharwads, and Rathwas thrive. The Rathwas, the most numerous and colorful among them, lead a harmonious life with nature. Despite perceived backwardness, their intriguing social and religious customs stand out. John Malcolm's Memoir of Central India (1823) designates the Tendlah area and the hilly expanse of the Vindhya range up to the Narmada River as the 'Rath Area,' encompassing Alirajpur, Jobat, Bhabhra, and nearby regions. The tribe gets its name from the ancient Dravidian term 'Rath bistar' which means the hilly and forested regions. In the nineteenth century, the western part merged into the Chhota Udaipur state, leading the Adivasis in this area to be known as Rathwas.

KAWANT TALUKA

Nestled in Gujarat's Chhota Udepur District, Kawant Taluka captivates with its diverse landscape, blending plains and hills at an elevation of 90 meters². The cultural tapestry is woven with Gujarati, Hindi, English, and the distinctive Rathvi dialect spoken by the Rath tribe. With a population of 210,002 (105,615 males, 104,387 females), Kawant embraces a rural lifestyle across its 133 villages. Vital amenities like anganwadis, schools, colleges, hospitals, libraries, a bus stand, markets, restaurants, and gyms contribute to community well-being. To delve into Kawant's essence, explore economic activities, attractions, administrative structures, and cultural festivities.

UPANISHADIC EDUCATION AND ITS RELEVANCE

[a] Analysis of educational principles in the Upanishads: Rooted in the Vedic tradition, the Upanishads offer timeless wisdom, providing profound insights into life, awareness, and the pursuit of knowledge. Beyond their religious context, these texts significantly influence educational philosophy. They illuminate a holistic approach to education, integrating intellectual, spiritual, and moral dimensions. Emphasizing the interconnectedness of knowledge and spirituality, the Upanishads advocate for character development and ethical values alongside academic learning. The Guru-Disciple dynamic underscores the importance of mentorship, while the teachings encourage experiential learning, critical thinking, and self-inquiry. The ancient Gurukulas, situated in natural surroundings, reflect the historical integration of education with nature. Additionally, the Upanishads' portrayal of the longing for human well-being resonates with contemporary concerns. In tribal areas, where environmental and ethnic diversity prevails, education has been traditionally oral, emphasizing art, songs, and dances. Despite geographical, social, and economic challenges, the tribal communities' quest for knowledge remains strong, driven by a deep connection with nature and a sacred, value-based tradition.

[B] Consideration of how these principles might have influenced or excluded tribal communities

The Upanishads, which are ancient Indian philosophical texts forming the core of Vedanta, primarily focus on spiritual and metaphysical inquiries.

❖ **Spiritual and Philosophical Emphasis**

The Upanishads are primarily concerned with metaphysical and spiritual inquiries, exploring concepts such as the nature of reality, the self (Atman), and the ultimate reality (Brahman). The emphasis on these abstract and philosophical concepts might not directly address the practical educational needs or concerns of tribal communities, which often have a more immediate focus on survival, livelihoods, and community well-being.

❖ **Cultural and Social Context**

The Upanishads emerged in a historical and cultural context that was significantly different from that of many tribal communities³. The ideas and principles presented in the Upanishads were developed within a Vedic Brahmanical tradition, which may not have been directly applicable or accessible to diverse tribal cultures with distinct belief systems and practices.

❖ **Access to Knowledge and Caste Dynamics**

The Upanishads were traditionally studied and preserved within a Brahminical tradition, and access to this knowledge was often restricted to certain castes. The hierarchical caste system prevalent in ancient India might have excluded tribal communities from participating in the educational and philosophical discourse as equals.

❖ **Language and Cultural Barriers**

The language and cultural nuances of the Upanishads, often presented in Sanskrit, could create barriers for tribal communities who may have had their own languages, dialect and cultural frameworks. The philosophical and abstract nature of Upanishadic discussions might not have been easily accessible or relevant to tribal communities with distinct worldviews.

❖ **Practical Knowledge vs. Theoretical Wisdom**

² From the book Being Tribal by Shereen Ratnagar, 2019 New Delhi, Primus Books

³ Isa Upanishad – Sri Aurobindo Ashram website <https://www.sriurobindoashram.org/sriurobindo>

Tribal communities often prioritize practical knowledge related to agriculture, hunting, herbal medicine, and other skills essential for their livelihoods. The Upanishads, on the other hand, primarily focus on abstract philosophical concepts. This distinction in the nature of knowledge might contribute to a perceived gap between the educational principles outlined in the Upanishads and the practical needs of tribal communities.

COLONIAL ERA AND ITS EFFECT ON TRIBAL EDUCATION

During the colonial era in India, which roughly spanned from the 17th to the mid-20th century, the British colonial rulers implemented policies and practices that significantly impacted tribal education in Gujarat. The effects of the colonial era on tribal education in Gujarat can be understood through various key aspects:

- ❖ **Land Policies and Displacement:** The British implemented land policies that often led to the displacement of tribal communities from their traditional lands. This disrupted not only their socio-economic systems but also their access to traditional forms of education, which were closely tied to the local environment.
- ❖ **Forest Policies and Disruption of Traditional Knowledge:** Forest policies, driven by the colonial administration's interest in resource extraction, restricted tribal access to forests. This had a profound impact on the traditional knowledge systems of tribal communities, as forests were integral to their way of life and learning. Traditional ecological knowledge, which was transmitted through generations, was disrupted.
- ❖ **Introduction of Western Education:** The British introduced a formal education system based on Western ideals. The curriculum and teaching methods were not adapted to the needs and perspectives of tribal students.
- ❖ **Neglect of Tribal Areas:** Tribal areas were often neglected in terms of infrastructure development, including education.
- ❖ **Criminal Tribes Act (1871):** The Criminal Tribes Act stigmatized and criminalized several tribal communities without proper justification. This policy led to the forced migration, settlement, and control of these communities, disrupting their social structures and access to education. The negative labeling further marginalized them.
- ❖ **Impact on Traditional Systems of Education:** The disruption caused by colonial policies affected the informal and traditional systems of education prevalent among tribal communities.

POST-INDEPENDENCE EDUCATIONAL REFORMS FOR RATHWA TRIBALS

Post-independence, several educational reforms and initiatives have been implemented in Gujarat to address the specific needs of tribal communities. These reforms aim to bridge the educational gap, improve access to quality education, and promote socio-economic development. The missionary intervention and Government Policies and initiatives of the Local Rathwa leaders have played vital role for educating the Tribal students.⁴

Their weak source base, their low position in socio-economic and political hierarchy, illiteracy, their relative lack of access to facilities provided by developmental measures.

However, the contemporary challenges faced by the tribal people in order to acquire education are as follows.

- ❖ **Medium of language:** In most of the states, official/regional languages are used for class room teaching and these are not understood by the tribal children at primary level as they have their own dialect Rathwai.
- ❖ **The Location of the Village:** The physical barrier as well the public transport creates a hindrance for the child to attend school in remote villages.
- ❖ **Economic Condition:** Rathwa tribal community is economically backward. It is very difficult for them to fulfill their basic needs. They prefer to send their children to work to supplement the family income. Most of the Rathwa tribals due to lack of their own lands are laborers in fields, construction work or the diamond factories.
- ❖ **Attitude of the parents:** As education does not yield any immediate economic return, some parents prefer to engage their children in remunerative employment which supplements the family income specially the girl child.
- ❖ **Teacher Related Problems:** In the village areas the teacher absenteeism is a regular phenomenon and this affects largely the quality of education.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES FOR TRIBAL EDUCATION

The importance of education as an agency of modernization as well as a source of employment has long been realized in our national plans for tribal welfare.

- ❖ **Post- Matric Scholarship for Scheduled Tribe Students:** This scheme was introduced to encourage the ST students pursuing post-matriculation, in professional, technical as well as non-professional courses in various recognized institution by providing them financial support.

⁴ From Tribal Development in India: Programmes and Perspectives by Mahendra Mohan Verma ,1996, Darya Ganj, New Delhi, Mittal Publication by K.M. Mittal

- ❖ **Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship Scheme (RGNF):** RGNF was introduced in the year 2005-2006 with the objective to encourage the students belonging to ST community to pursue higher education such as M.Phil and Ph.D by providing them financial assistance. University Grant Commission (UGC) took the responsibility to implement this scheme on the behalf of Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
- ❖ **Vocational Training Center in Tribal Areas:** Aim of this scheme is to develop the skill of ST students depending on their qualification and present market trends. This vocational training would enable them to get suitable employment or enable them to become self sufficient.
- ❖ **National Overseas Scholarship Scheme for ST:** This scheme provides financial support to those meritorious tribal students who wish to pursue their studies in abroad (Masters, Doctorate, Post-Doctorate) in specified field of Engineering, Technology, and Science.
- ❖ **Scheme of Top-Class Education for ST Students:** A scheme of scholarship was introduced by Ministry of Tribal affairs in 2007-2008 to encourage brilliant students of tribal community for continuing their study at degree or post-degree level.
- ❖ **Ashram School in Tribal Sub-Plan Area:** This scheme was started in 1990-1991 with a view to provide education with residential facility to ST students. Tribal Research Institute: Fourteen Tribal Research Institutes (TRIs) have been set up in dropout rate among ST students from professional institutes/ universities, funds are allotted for purchase of books under this scheme.
- ❖ **Establishments of new Eklavya Model School:** Central government has announced on 6 December, 2019 announced that 400 Eklavya Model residential schools will be setup across the nation's tribal belts by as soon as 2022. In this context it is underlined that network of Eklavya Model schools are being built to provide students
- ❖ **Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan:** In 2003 providing elementary education to all children in the age group of 6-12 by the year 2010. Mid-day meal scheme 2001: which gives a mid-day meal to school going children, that dramatically increase the enrollment rate. Free Uniforms There is a scheme of providing two sets of free uniform to the children in elementary schools.
- ❖ **The Right to Education (RTE) Act** in India is a comprehensive legislation that aims to provide free and compulsory education to all children aged 6 to 14 years. The RTE Act, enacted in 2009, mandates certain provisions that are applicable to Rathwa children irrespective of their tribal or social background.

SUCCESS STORIES

The Rathwa tribe, residing in the Chhota Udaipur district of Gujarat, has undergone a remarkable transformation in the realm of education. With the establishment of government schools in every village for elementary education, the community has witnessed a surge in educational endeavors. This article explores the strides made by the Rathwa tribe in education, highlighting achievements in higher education, cultural contributions, and notable individuals who have brought honor to the community.

❖ **Educational Advancements:** In recent years, the Rathwa tribe has witnessed a transformative surge in educational opportunities, showcasing a dedicated commitment to holistic development. Eklavya and Model schools, along with an arts and training college, reflect this commitment, fostering academic growth and skill development. The integration of English medium schools broadens educational horizons, with a current landscape boasting 33 schools, 6 Ashram Shala, and 10 colleges—providing a comprehensive framework from primary to higher education. Additionally, a library and competitive exam coaching centers enhance educational resources. The Adivasi Academy, a cultural hub with a museum, library, school, and centers for weaving and music, stands as a testament to the Rathwa tribe's resilience and commitment to a well-rounded development harmonizing traditional values with modern learning approaches.

❖ **Professional Contributions:** The Rathwa tribe has made substantial contributions to the nation, with a significant number of individuals choosing to serve in various capacities. Notably, 35 Rathwa doctors are actively providing medical services across different parts of Kawan, exemplifying the community's commitment to healthcare. Additionally, the Rathwa community takes great pride in its representation in the armed forces, with members actively safeguarding the nation's borders. The noteworthy presence of Rathwa teachers is acknowledged at the Taluka level, where they are recognized and facilitated for their exemplary contributions to education. Across different departments, Rathwa individuals hold prestigious positions, further emphasizing their significant role and impact in various sectors.

❖ **Cultural Resonance:** The Rathwa tribal dance has transcended local boundaries, becoming a symbol of cultural pride on national and international stages. Performances in Delhi and various parts of the country have not only showcased the rich cultural heritage of the Rathwas but also contributed to the preservation and promotion of tribal arts.

❖ **Notable Individuals:** The Rathwa tribe boasts accomplished individuals across various fields. Paresh Rathwa, a traditional Pithora painter from Chhota Udaipur district, was honored with the prestigious Padma Shri in 2023, underscoring the community's rich artistic heritage. In the realm of politics, figures like Mr. Sukhran

Rathwa and Naranbhai J. Rathwa have made significant contributions, representing the Chhota Udaipur constituency and serving as Members of Legislative Assembly and Rajya Sabha, respectively.

❖ **Impact on Rathwa Society:** Education has ushered in transformative changes in the lives of Rathwa individuals, impacting them individually, socially, and economically. However, despite the considerable progress, certain challenges persist, necessitating a continued focus on education as the need of the hour. The quest for self-identity, spiritual union, and a profound love for nature, rooted in the legacy received from the Upanishads, remains central to the Rathwa tribe's journey, illuminated by the light of education.

SUGGESTIONS

Education is the most effective instrument for ensuring equality of opportunity; keeping in view of this assumption the Government has been making several efforts to education by extending special educational facilities and reservation of seat in educational institutions. But the development of education is one of the important problems in the case of Rathwas For solving that problem I like to express some suggestions.

- ❖ **Literacy campaign** - Proper awareness campaign should be organized to create the awareness about the importance of education in the remote villages.
- ❖ **Attitude of the tribal parents** - The attitude of the tribal parents toward education specially the girl child, should be improved through proper counseling and guidance.
- ❖ **Relevant study materials in local languages** - All study materials should be supplied in local dialect at least for elementary.
- ❖ **Appointment of Local teachers and female teachers** - It is suggested to appoint more tribal teachers and female teachers in the tribal areas. The ecological, cultural, psychological characteristics of tribal children should be considered carefully by the teachers in tribal areas.
- ❖ **Residential schools** - More residential schools should be established in each states and districts and extended up to PG level in this Rathwa tribals area specially the English medium.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the educational journey of the Rathwa tribe stands as a compelling narrative of resilience and determination, showcasing a remarkable transformation over time. This study has delved into the historical influences, challenges faced, and the profound impact of educational reforms on the socio-economic development of the Rathwas, particularly in the Kawant region. The celebration of achievements in higher education, cultural contributions, and the acknowledgment of notable individuals underscores the positive strides made.

However, persistent challenges such as language barriers, economic conditions, and teacher-related issues persist. Recognizing this, the article emphasizes the urgent need for sustained efforts in education, proposing initiatives like literacy campaigns, attitudinal changes, provision of relevant study materials, local teacher appointments, and the establishment of additional residential schools, particularly in places like Kawant. Despite the progress made, the Rathwa tribe's unwavering connection to their cultural roots and the pursuit of self-identity remain pivotal. This connection serves as a guiding force, shaping their journey towards a future empowered by the transformative potential of education. The legacy of self-identity, deeply rooted in the Upanishads, continues to steer the Rathwa tribe in Kawant, promising a future where education becomes a catalyst for holistic development and cultural preservation.

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