Educational Aspirations and Career Choices of Tribal College Students in Jharkhand

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Abstract:
Jharkhand is situated in one of the largest concentrations of Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities in India, although aggregate enrolment in higher education is only lower than the state average or the national ST average. This paper explores ways in which structural circumstances, family and community resources, institutional experiences, and career information influence the education and career choices of tribal college students in Jharkhand. It relies on an integrative literature review and descriptive analysis of publicly available secondary data, mostly the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 202324 and the statistical profile of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs census. In 202324, AISHE estimates a higher-education enrolment of 189,581 ST students in Jharkhand out of an overall enrolment of 20.6% of higher education. The gross enrolment rate in ST was 15.6% against 19.4 in Jharkhand and 22.8 in the rest of the country and 22.8 among ST students. There was a higher enrolment of females in ST and a higher enrolment of females in ST GER which shows a significant shift in participation. But participation does not show equal freedom of choice or accomplishment of preferred careers. The synthesis demonstrates that ambitions tend to be intense and are associated with social mobility, stable employment, family progression, and service to the community, but their translation into practical options is constrained by financial insecurity, parental lack of experience of higher education, language barrier, ineffective career guidance, geographic seclusion, inequality in the quality of institutions, discrimination, and weak professional networks. The paper advises a coordinated strategy which includes predictable financial assistance, culturally sensitive counselling, mentoring, bridge support, internships, reaching the community and better data systems.

Keywords: tribal students, educational aspirations, career choice, higher education, Jharkhand, Scheduled Tribes.

Introduction

The Present Educational Aspirations and Career Choices of the Tribal College Students in Jharkhand

The level and type of education that a student aspires to, and the occupation and pathway that this translates into in the adult world, are discussed as educational aspiration and career choice respectively. These concepts are similar but not the same. A student might want to pursue a professional course which may be shorter in length to save money, time, or if they have family responsibilities or are uncertain about employment, or they might want to complete a postgraduate degree. The difference between what tribal children want and what is possible for them is particularly significant, as it comes in the context of a tradition of restricted access to schools, disruption of land and livelihood, geographic remoteness, cultural marginalization and representation in institutions (Xaxa et al., 2014).

The relationship between the two is an important one in the context of Jharkhand. According to the Census 2011, STs form 26.2% of the state's population and the state has a variety of communities including the

Santhal, Munda, Oraon, Ho, Kharia and a few Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups. According to the same official website, the overall literacy rate in Jharkhand is 66.4% and the ST literacy rate is 57.1%. The disparity between men and women in the ST population was significant with ST literacy rate of 68.2% compared to 46.2% of females (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2024). While these statistics are for previous college generations, they reflect the state of education that many first-generation college students and their families came from.

Recent higher education statistics indicate progress and ongoing disparities. According to All India Survey on Higher Education-2023-24, there are an estimated 921,855 students at higher education level in Jharkhand with an estimated 189,581 ST students in the state. About 57.3% of ST enrolment was made up by women. However, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for ST in the age group 18-23 is 15.6% which is lower than Jharkhand overall GER (19.4%), all-India ST GER (22.8%) and all-India overall GER (30.0%) (Ministry of Education, 2026). So more people are participating numerically, especially females, but there remains an ongoing participation gap.

The main thesis of this paper is that the dreams of tribal students should not be regarded as low or be assumed to be realized when they get into college. Factors that shape aspirations are exposure, social relationships, perceived opportunity, and institutional recognition. They are career choices in the minds of students, when they have the informational, financial, academic, linguistic and social resources to make them. Therefore, the paper raises four questions: (1) What does the existing secondary data indicate about ST participation in the higher education in Jharkhand? (2) What are the personal, family, cultural and institutional determinants of aspiration? These would be the questions raised in the discussion under (3) How do these factors affect what careers students select and (4) What can be done to make aspirations a reality in terms of equitable outcomes?

Table 1- *Selected demographic and higher-education indicators for Scheduled Tribe students in Jharkhand*

Indicator	Value	Source / period
ST share of Jharkhand population	26.2%	Census 2011 profile
Overall literacy rate, Jharkhand	66.4%	Census 2011 profile
ST literacy rate, Jharkhand	57.1%	Census 2011 profile
ST male / female literacy	68.2% / 46.2%	Census 2011 profile
Total higher-education enrolment	921,855	AISHE 2023–24
ST higher-education enrolment	189,581	AISHE 2023–24
ST male / female enrolment	81,026 / 108,555	AISHE 2023–24
Female share of ST enrolment	57.3%	Author calculation
Jharkhand GER: all / ST	19.4% / 15.6%	AISHE 2023–24
Jharkhand ST GER: male / female	13.8% / 17.2%	AISHE 2023–24
All-India GER: all / ST	30.0% / 22.8%	AISHE 2023–24

Note. Population and literacy figures are Census 2011 indicators reported by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2024). Higher-education figures are from AISHE 2023–24 (Ministry of Education, 2026). Population share and enrolment share use different populations and should not be read as directly equivalent measures.

Theoretical Framework

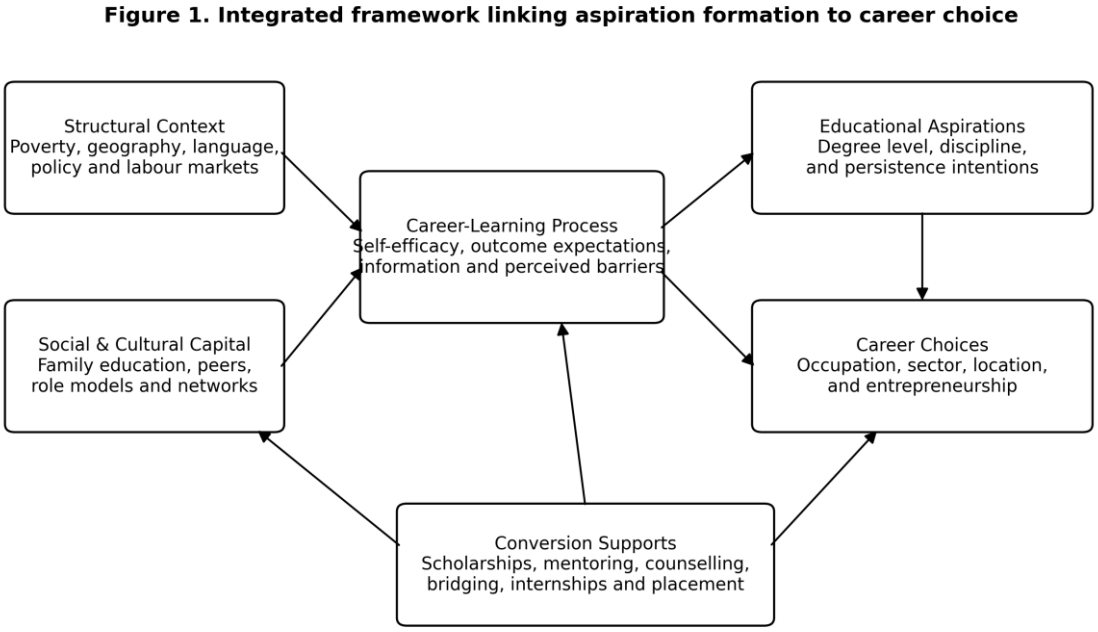
Four complementary perspectives are used in the analysis. First, ascribing the "capacity to aspire" to an aspiration is to understand it as a cultural and navigational capacity, rather than a private wish, as Appadurai (2004) does. This is something they learn as they repeatedly engage with maps of possible futures: which skills are needed, how the system of admission and recruitment works, who to turn to, and what risks they can take. This navigation is more available for groups that have more economic and social power. The issue for a first-generation tribal student might thus be not one of ambition, but one of reliable pathways that transform ambition to institutions and occupations.

Second, in Sen's (1999) capability approach, there is a difference between formal resources and real freedom. It is only a scholarship, reserved seat, college or a training programme that would give a student the ability to study, stay in school, graduate, and get a job if it is able to do that. The limitations of conversion can be due to travel expenses, slow payment or lack of hostels, domestic work requirements, language barriers, poor teaching, digital exclusion, or discrimination. This distinction helps prevent participation figures from being seen as representative of educational justice.

Third, Bourdieu (1986) argues that economic, social, and cultural capital can account for variations in the college experience among students who have academic potential but different backgrounds. Economic capital impacts the capacity to pay fees, travel costs, device costs, and the capacity to survive delayed scholarships. Cultural capital covers understanding of the dominant academic language, application processes, interviews and workplace demeanor. Social capital offers contacts who can share information on informal rules, suggest courses, introduce students to internships, or demonstrate unconventional careers. Public policy (including fellowships) does increase opportunities for marginalised students, but the ability to access this policy is also influenced by administrative knowledge, institutional support, and timely delivery, as highlighted by Bhoi and Lakra (2022).

Fourth, in Social Cognitive Career Theory, career interests and choices are developed with the help of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, and contextual supports and barriers (Lent et al., 1994). Students will be more likely to enter a field if they feel they can succeed, if they think the field will be rewarding, and if they think the field is accessible. Self-efficacy and outcome expectations are reinforced in the Jharkhand context by repeated success in school, supportive teachers, tribal role models, exposure to occupations and internships. On the other hand, if the school's approach to a child's education is weak, or they may have stereotypes, or pressures on money, or they don't have enough information about career, the field of options available that they view as realistic may be restricted. The integrated framework in Figure 1 will therefore view aspiration and choice as a product of agency and structure.

Figure 1- *Integrated framework linking aspiration formation to career choice*



Note. The framework integrates the capacity-to-aspire perspective (Appadurai, 2004), capability approach (Sen, 1999), forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994).

Methodology

The design of this study is secondary data and integrative review. Does not state it is a survey of college students. The quantitative indicators were derived from the AISHE 2023-24 report by Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs' Census-based statistical profile, 2024. The analysis is done on ST enrolment and the gender ratio in Jharkhand as well as comparison with national level along with the GER. The female enrolment as a proportion of ST enrolment and ST enrolment as a proportion of state enrolment were derived using descriptive calculations.

The qualitative component is a synthesis of peer reviewed and policy literature on issues of tribal aspiration, access to higher education, career awareness, gender and institutional experience. Studies from Jharkhand and eastern and central India were given priority, along with theories of career and aspirations. Studies from Jharkhand and eastern and central India were given priority and basic career and aspiration theories were also included. Family resources, financial conditions, language/cultural, career information, academic preparation, institutional climate, gender, role models and labour-market opportunity were key themes, with codes being assigned to themes that emerged repeatedly across both academic and labour-market dimensions. Themes were coded with family resources, financial conditions, language/culture, career information, academic preparation, institutional climate, gender, role models and labour market opportunity being the key themes. Themes emerged repeatedly across both academic and labour-market dimensions were coded. Since source studies come from various populations and procedures, the synthesis identifies mechanisms that are common across these studies but does not manipulate effect sizes to combine them.

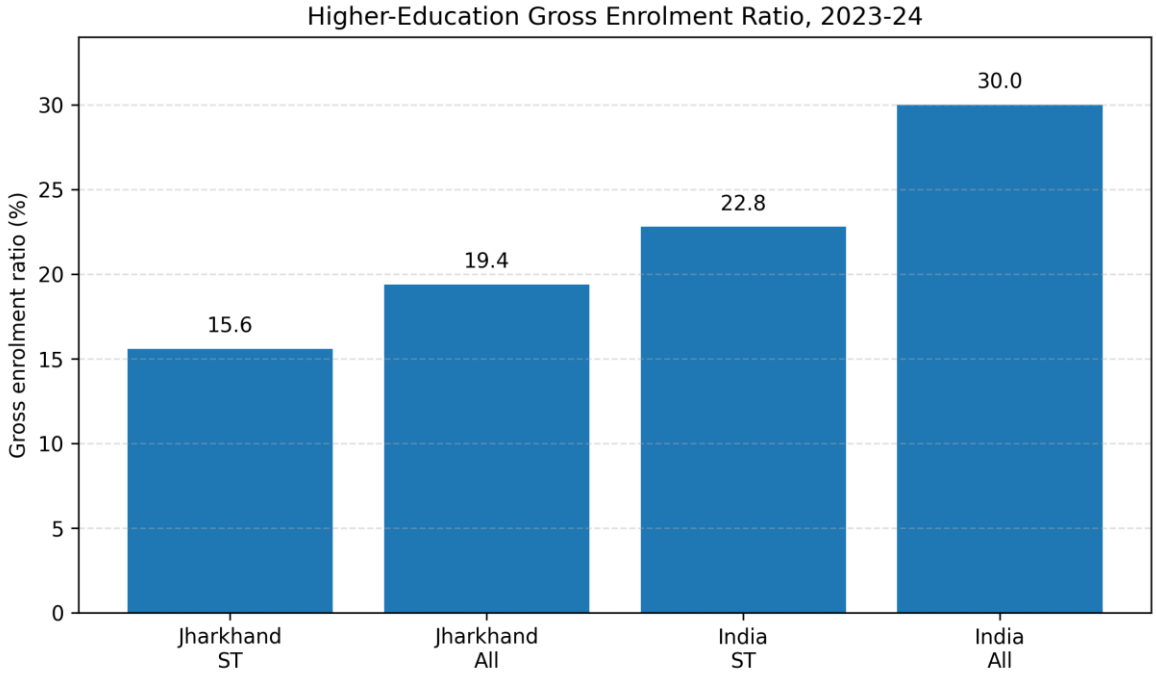
There are three limitations in this study. First, ST is one of those categories that is aggregated from administration, which has communities with various histories, languages, places and levels of disadvantage. Secondly, AISHE does not offer participation data or students aspirations, preferred occupations or reason for choice. Thirdly, the literature generated by students in the schools does not pretend to be representative

of all tribal college students in the state of Jharkhand. Conclusions should thus make way for student voices in a future field survey.

Results and Discussion

The mixed picture of expansion and exclusion is highlighted in Table 1. In 2023-24, the enrolment in higher education in Jharkhand by ST students was 20.6% and in 2011, the percentage of ST communities in the state is 26.2%. Not directly comparable as the population share is for all ages and the enrolment share is for higher education, however the difference is consistent with the low ST GER. The ST GER of 15.6% was 3.8 percentage points lower than the overall GER of the state, and 7.2 percentage points lower than the national ST average. This was an improvement of 14.4 points from the all-India overall GER (Ministry of Education, 2026). The findings show that despite the growth of higher education institutions and affirmative action policies, a significant proportion of tribal youth are still not in college.

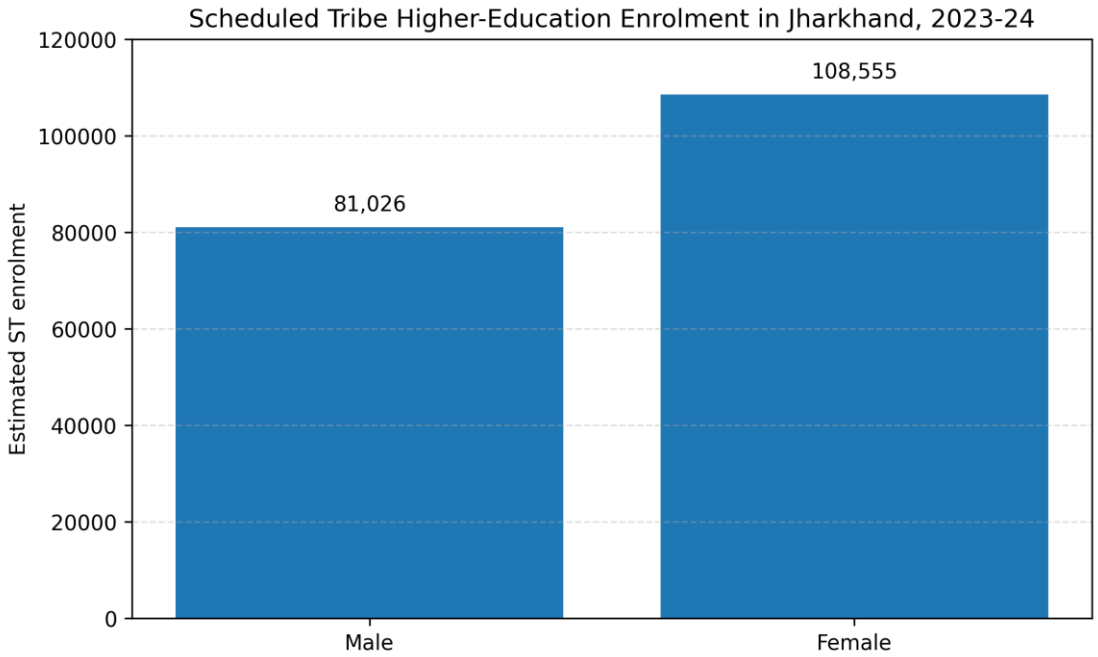
Figure 2- *Higher-education gross enrolment ratio: Jharkhand and India, 2023–24*



Note. Source: Ministry of Education (2026). GER is calculated for the 18–23 age group using the population base specified in AISHE.

The gender pattern is more positive but needs to be interpreted. The estimated ST higher-education enrolment in Jharkhand was 81,026 men and 108,555 women, which represents 57.3% women enrolment in ST HE. The female ST GER was 17.2% while the males were 13.8% (Ministry of Education, 2026). The figures may be due to the impact on girls' education, support in the family, girls' use of hostels, and changes in the perceived value of degrees. They may also partially be mirrored by male participation in paid work, migration or non-degree training. Equal access to high return disciplines, post graduate education, placement network, geographic mobility or safe employment does not always follow increased enrolment of women. Therefore, gender parity in terms of entry needs to be separated from gender parity in terms of choice and outcome.

Figure 3- *Scheduled Tribe higher-education enrolment in Jharkhand by gender, 2023–24*



Note. Source: Ministry of Education (2026). Female students represented approximately 57.3% of estimated ST enrolment in Jharkhand.

The notion that tribal students have generally low aspirations is not supported in literature. The findings of Das et al. (2025) indicated that the process of parental interaction, teacher interaction, peer interaction, and school environment are all influencing the educational aspirations. The ethnographic study of Oraon girls by Nayak and Kumar (2022) also revealed that education was seen as a means of social upliftment for the girls, and that the presence of supportive teachers, families' encouragement, the absence of an income source, the local language, and the curriculum were factors that helped maintain their participation. In higher education, it can mean more than just a paycheck; it could mean family support, social esteem, community presence and a dream of being a teacher, a health professional, an administrator, a lawyer, or a development professional, among other things. This community aspect is not an absence of individual ambition, but an extension of what success in a career means.

Meanwhile, there are perceptions of feasibility that limit aspirations. Those families who struggle to earn regular income might support jobs with regular earnings or established job hiring guidelines, or even government positions. Long and unclear career paths (medicine, research, elite professional education, entrepreneurship) can seem daunting due to coaching, multiple entry exams, moving, unpaid preparation, or the need for start-up money. Moitra (2024) further points out that participation in the prestigious and specialized institutions of Jharkhand is limited for the Adivasis and that low participation in higher education is further exacerbated by limited access to remunerative employment. It's a typical ability dilemma: students might want to go into a career, but they don't have the circumstances to go for it without risking too much on the family.

The amount of training received, and the choice of training subject are both affected by economic factors. Tuition is only one component of cost. Students may have to cover the cost of transport, accommodation, food, exam, documents, internet, devices, coaching and loss of opportunity costs from postponing entry to work. The national post-matric scholarship scheme is a scheme of the Government of India for support to eligible ST students from Class XI to higher level of education (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023). Bhoi and Lakra (2022), however, have shown that delays, administrative hassles, and lack of awareness may

undermine the effectiveness of fellowship and scholarship programmes in practice. If it is not known whether they will receive support, students might opt for a different general degree than one of their professional choices, work and study at the same time or postpone their postgraduate studies.

The quality of guidance available is related to parental education and family experience. While there may be considerable emotional support, technical guidance on what subjects to take, entrance tests, credit systems, internships, postgraduate study, or when employers will be looking is often very limited. There is a distinction to be made and that is that low informational capital does not necessarily equate to parental indifference. The involvement of parents, teachers and peers is a pivotal triad in the formation of aspirations as identified by Das et al. (2025) and Nayak and Kumar (2022) demonstrate the role of parental support in countering economic and social pressures in aspiration formation. By making complex academic and career journeys easier to understand through local language information and engaging parents at critical moments, colleges can further build family support.

Career awareness is one area in particular that is a weak link between aspiration and choice. Kindo and Astalin (2020) in their study of 200 tribal and non-tribal students of higher secondary schools in Gumla district revealed that 40% tribal students were low with respect to career awareness whereas 24% tribal students were in high tier of career-awareness status. Small and school-based, the study is not representative of all Jharkhand, but it does provide a sketch of a familiar pattern: pupils may be aware of a limited number of occupations that are visible to them but may not have information about the skills and costs required, the alternatives available, or the job prospects linked to these options. This information vacuum can result in late enrollment, course switchings, informal consultation and focus on familiar careers at college.

The influence of language/cultural recognition on aspiration is in two ways: learning and belonging. Students educated in Santali, Mundari, Ho, Kurukh, Kharia, Nagpuri, or other local languages can enter college wherein the textbooks and assessment and administration and professional communication are in Hindi or English mediums. Even with high conceptual ability this can reduce participation and self-efficacy in the classroom. Moitra (2024) states that the lack of recognition of tribal identities in institutions limits agencies, while Nayak and Kumar (2022) point out some facilitating factors, such as local language use and curricular relevance. Culturally responsive support does not mean to reduce academic standards, it means to incorporate bridge courses, multilingual explanation, academic writing support, recognition of indigenous knowledge, and institutional spaces where tribal identity is not seen as a deficit.

Students' career aspirations are also influenced by institutional climate. Faculty, tribal alumna and peers, and mentoring can help make unknown professions visible and accessible. Conversely, gentle discrimination, isolation, low expectations, or lack of faculty in one's own tribe in certain disciplines and occupations can convey to students from marginalized communities that certain things are not for them or belong to others. The role of formal higher education as a protective factor for marginalisation within higher education is highlighted by Bhoi and Lakra (2022). Students who experience administration's "blind-eye" and social exclusion repeatedly may lower their expectations, reject competitive opportunities and seek the fastest path to a credential.

Career options are then best seen as “constrained options”. Student agencies are exercised but in unequal opportunity structures. Family care, language, safety, or housing factors may be reasons for opting for a secure local job over a preferred job in the metro area. Technical education may be chosen in lieu of a bachelor’s degree because the local college is affordable. An examination by the government may be preferred due to its clearer eligibility criteria and social acceptability when compared to recruitment by the private sector. While entrepreneurship can be an appealing career path to stay close to the community, it is challenging without access to credit, seeing business success, business mentoring, digital access, and market connections. The evidence reviewed does not allow a specific hierarchy ranking the options that are seen as realistic among tribal college students in Jharkhand but does support the stronger conclusion that options

that are seen as realistic are heavily influenced by perceived security, social recognition, affordability, information and network access.

The main mechanisms are summarized in Table 2. The pattern is not just a barrier pattern. A combination of family support, increasingly involvement of women, peer circles, role models, scholarships, reservations, local identity, and a sense of community development are great resources. The policy issue is to link these assets to broader education and employment opportunities.

Table 2- *Factors shaping educational aspirations and career choices*

Factor	Mechanism affecting aspiration or choice	Institutional implication
Household finances	Fees, transport, housing, devices, coaching, and opportunity costs narrow the range of feasible courses.	Predictable aid, emergency grants, affordable hostels, and paid internships.
Parental education and guidance	Emotional support may be strong, but first-generation families may lack procedural knowledge about admissions and careers.	Family-facing orientation in accessible and local languages.
Career information	Limited exposure concentrates on a small number of familiar or secure occupations.	Career curriculum from first year, occupation databases, alumni sessions, and counselling.
Language and academic preparation	Mismatch between home/school language and college language may lower participation and self-efficacy.	Multilingual bridge supports academic writing, digital and quantitative skills.
Institutional climate	Belonging, mentoring, and faculty expectations affect persistence and willingness to enter competitive fields.	Mentor systems, anti-discrimination procedures, tribal faculty/alumni networks.
Gender and family roles	Women may enter college in high numbers yet face safety, mobility, marriage, and occupational constraints; men may exit early for work.	Safe transport/hostels, flexible support, gender-disaggregated transition and placement tracking.
Geography and labour markets	Distance from institutions and limited local professional networks shape course and migration decisions.	Regional internships, local employer partnerships, hybrid guidance, and community-linked enterprise.
Community identity and service	Aspirations may include collective advancement and cultural continuity, not only individual income.	Recognize community-oriented careers and indigenous knowledge as professional assets.

Note. Synthesis based on Appadurai (2004), Bhoi and Lakra (2022), Das et al. (2025), Kindo and Astalin (2020), Moitra (2024), Nayak and Kumar (2022), and Sen (1999). Policy and Institutional Recommendations.

Their main concern, the first step would be to integrate career development throughout the college lifecycle than providing one-time placement meeting in the last semester. The first year requires the students to have organized self-evaluation, degree and career information, online and academic orientation, and personalized learning plans. During the mid years, they should be subjected to exposure trips, alumni contact, internship, project work, and exposure to information regarding postgraduate or competitive-examination paths. Last year's support should be redirected to applications, interview practice, language and communication, entrepreneurship and placement. The model is based on Social Cognitive Career Theory and enhances self-efficacy, outcome expectations and concrete goals and minimizes contextual barriers (Lent et al., 1994).

Second, funding should be foreseeable and avoid complexities. The lack of knowledge about the rules, difficulties with uploading the documents, payment of students after payment of the fees and payments on the living costs weakens scholarship. The colleges that are known to handle a huge number of tribal students should also have scholarship facilitation desks, multilingual checklists, application monitoring, grievances escalation and emergency bridging funds. Application, verification, sanction, and payment schedules should be posted on state and institutional dashboards. Increasing the number of beneficiaries is not the goal but lowering the ambiguity that skews course and career choices.

Third, colleges are supposed to come up with culturally responsive academic and psychosocial support. Bridge classes in English, Hindi, quantitative skills, digital literacy, academic writing, etc., can be provided without a sense of segregation or stigmatization of students. To identify challenges faced by first-generation, those who work on the faculty should be trained to identify discriminative practices. The relevance curriculum components may include tribal languages, literature, history, environmental knowledge, and community research, in line with the requirements of the National Education Policy of inclusion, multilingualism, and flexible learning (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Belonging can be reinforced with student associations and mentoring networks and can bridge identification with professional development.

Fourth, role-model and network shortages need to be instigated intentionally by the institution. Every college can develop a list of tribal alumni and professionals of public administration, education, health, law, engineering, science, business, media, agriculture and civil society. Mentoring must involve practical orientation: which expositions to choose, fund raising, creating a resume, finding references, seeking out internships, utilizing professional networks, and relocation. Engagement by the alumni is particularly useful as it offers information along with believable evidence that a pathway is achievable.

Fifth, career planning is to be associated with regional development instead of an option between migration and unemployment. The colleges of Jharkhand may collaborate with local government, local hospitals, local schools, banks, legal services, local cooperatives, mine and industries, forest and environmental programmes, tourism programs, digital-service firms, social enterprises. Priority should be on paid internships and apprenticeships since unpaid work excludes students who are not able to subsidize work. Merit support to entrepreneurs should be in credit literacy, market research, bookkeeping, digital trade, procurement prospects and an incubation of enterprises based in agriculture, forest produce, crafts, language services, sustainable tourism, education, and community technology enterprises.

Sixth, gender-responsive policy should transcend enrolment. One of the key strengths of Female ST participation is their attendance of colleges, however, colleges ought to monitor the subject choice, hostels safety, transportation security, internship, postgraduate preparation, placement, wages, and continuity of career. The married students or students with care requirements may require flexible mentoring and childcare. The involvement of males also deserves a consideration whereby early labor and migration are

forces that keep young males out of college. The gender-responsive approach must increase actual option among women and men and not think that overall equality has resolved disparity.

Lastly, there is need for better evidence. Jharkhand ought to develop a representative (both qualitative and quantitative) study of tribal college students on a district, community, and gender, institution type, discipline, and study year. The survey is to be conducted assessing educational objectives, the desired careers, self-efficacy, career consciousness, financial strain, scholarship experience, discrimination, language, internet access, family expectations, exposure to internships, and planned migration. The interviews ought to investigate the way students strike a balance between community responsibility and personal ambition. Longitudinal follow-up would present which aspirations are maintained, updated, or interrupted. Table 3 suggests feasible indicators in assessing these interventions.

Table 3- *Recommended intervention and evaluation framework*

Domain	Priority action	Illustrative indicator
Career development	Credit-bearing career education, individual plans, alumni mentoring	Career awareness gain; internship and application rates
Financial access	Scholarship facilitation, payment tracking, emergency bridge grants	On-time payment; reduced financial interruption and dropout
Academic transition	Language, writing, quantitative, and digital bridge modules	Course pass rates; confidence and progression
Belonging and inclusion	Faculty mentoring, tribal student networks, anti-discrimination support	Sense of belonging; grievance resolution; retention
Employment linkage	Paid internships, apprenticeships, placement and entrepreneurship partnerships	Placement, postgraduate transition, enterprise survival
Gender equity	Safe mobility, hostel support, flexible mentoring, gender-disaggregated tracking	Field choice, placement, wage and continuation gaps
Evidence system	Representative aspiration survey and longitudinal follow-up	Annual public dashboard and policy adjustment

Note. Indicators should be disaggregated by gender, district, tribe/community where ethically appropriate, institution type, discipline, and year of study.

Conclusion

The enrolment of tribal college students in Jharkhand has increased and currently the female population is more than the male population in the enrolment of students in the fields of science and technology. However, the ST GER is still significantly lower than the state overall and ST national average. This contrast highlights the main conclusion of the paper: while access is growing, there is a low level of freedom to transform education into a preferred career.

Education aspirations are fostered through family encouragement, teachers, peers, community values, institutional experiences and exposure to possible futures. Career choices are then narrowed down on the basis of factors like cost, information, language, academic preparation, safety, networks, and labour-market structure. The proper policy response is not to "raise aspiration" alone; one should not assume students are lacking in ambition. Its aim is to enhance the navigational and material possibilities that make aspirations become action. Reliable scholarships, culturally responsive counseling, academic bridging, mentoring, in-residence paid internships and community-related employment, and improved data can expand tribal students' options to make career choices that are truly theirs to make.

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