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## **TOKENISM IN EDUCATION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TRIBAL STUDENTS IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a critical analysis of the topic of tokenism in Indian higher education and its effects on the inclusion, participation and well-being of tribal students. Tokenism is said to be the superficial inclusion of marginalized groups without making sure they are substantially equitable, represented, and empowered. Based on secondary data, policy reports, and the available academic literature, the paper describes the role of affirmative action policies, in particular reservation systems, in enhancing access to higher education but not eliminating more profound structural inequalities. This analysis shows that the symbolic inclusion of tribal students is usually characterized by low levels of involvement, alienation to their culture, and marginalization by a system of knowledge. The major problems that have been identified include the language barrier, the lack of indigenous knowledge systems in academic programs, institutional prejudice, and insufficient academic and psychosocial services. The paper contextualizes these concerns within the larger theoretical concept of critical pedagogy, cultural capital, and epistemic justice and explains how educational institutions replicate the prevalent power structures in spite of their supposed inclusivity. Besides, the results underline the idea that enrolment quantitative growth does not always lead to qualitative inclusion and meaningful engagement. The paper proposes a change of performative diversity into transformative inclusion using culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive curriculum, enhanced support, and participatory governance. It concludes that to attain actual educational equity, structural and epistemic change is needed whereby tribal students are seen as producers of knowledge, not as the consumers of education.

**Keywords:** Tokenism, Tribal Students, Higher Education, Epistemic Justice, Social Inequality.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Education is generally recognized as a transformative tool of promoting social mobility, empowerment, and social justice. It is important in minimizing inequalities and allowing the marginalized groups to have a meaningful role in the socio-economic and political life (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Nevertheless, with the growth of educational opportunities, especially in postcolonial countries such as India, inclusion tends to be a farce, not an actual process. That is why tokenism has remained relevant as a trend whereby the otherwise marginalized groups are only being drawn in symbolically, but not because of their structural inequalities (Kanter, 1977; Ahmed, 2012). The concept of tokenism thus, is not a true inclusion, but a performative act which hides systematic exclusion.

Tribal communities in the Indian setting have a long history of various types of marginalization based on colonialist policies, socio-economic deprivation, and cultural marginalization (Xaxa, 2008; Shah et al., 2018). These societies have experienced chronic issues of barriers to education such as geographical isolation, poverty, language barrier, and inability to access good education. Although affirmative action policies have been enacted in post-independence India, e.g. reservations in tertiary institutions of higher learning, to enhance equity, the effects of these policies have been on quantitative rather than qualitative inclusion (Deshpande, 2011). As a result, tribal students are becoming a more frequent part of the higher education environment, whose experience is characterized by marginal status and invisibility.

The practice of tokenism in higher education takes place in different ways across institutions and pedagogy. Symbolic representation is one of the most pronounced ones where the presence of tribal students is employed to show diversity, without necessarily making them meaningful in the academic or decision-making processes. Kanter (1977) contends that token people in most cases are more visible, stereotyped, and isolated individuals thereby restricting their participation in the institutions. This phenomenon is common in Indian universities, in which tribal students are often included numerically but not structurally.



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Curriculum exclusion is another most important aspect of tokenism. Western epistemologies and knowledge systems of upper castes dominate mainstream educational systems in India, subordinating other knowledge traditions, indigenous and tribal (Sundar, 2016; De Andreotti, 2014). This epistemic injustice is part of what Fricker (2007) envisages as epistemic injustice whereby some groups are systematically sidelined in knowledge production and validation. To tribal students, this translates into a loss of touch with the lived experiences they have and they are supposed to be interacting with their bodies of knowledge, both in academic achievement and identity construction.

Language is also a major contributor in the perpetuation of tokenistic inclusion. The prevalence of the English and other major regional languages in higher education usually undermines tribes languages and results in the obstacles to understanding, expression, and engagement (Mohanty, 2019). Such linguistic marginalization does not only have an impact on academic performance, but it also confirms the sense of alienation and inferiority amongst tribal students. Moreover, the institutional settings do not necessarily have culturally responsive pedagogies and support systems that are required to promote inclusive learning environments.

There are significant psychological and social consequences of the tokenism. The studies show that the lack of proper support structures in superficial inclusion might result in isolation, anxiety, and low self-efficacy among marginalized students (Steele, 1997; Walton and Cohen, 2011). As such, the significance of the social support systems i.e. peer networks, mentorship and institutional support has been highlighted as a very vital component of improving the state of well-being and academic achievement. The posted research on the well-being of the elderly also highlights that meaningful inclusion must be well supported and actively participated in as opposed to active presence. This fact can also be applied to the educational contexts, where the lack of supportive structures enhances the detrimental effects of tokenism.

Further, the concept of tokenism should be explained in the context of larger structures of inequality and power dynamics. According to critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), education systems tend to reproduce the hierarchies they have unless it is explicitly transformed. On the same note, the idea of cultural capital introduced by Bourdieu (1986) describes how the dominant groups sustain their privilege by favouring their respective cultural ideals in learning institutions. In this regard, tribal students are usually located as outsiders, who do not have the cultural and symbolic capital that contributes to their success, which reaffirms the exclusion patterns.

Considering such complexities, there is a strong need to critically analyze the nature and meaning of tokenism in Indian higher education. Although the policy interventions have gone far in enhancing access, there is an urgent need to deal with the problems of participation, representation, and epistemic justice. The aim of this paper is to examine the operation of tokenistic practices in learning institutions and their effects on the academic experiences and welfare of tribal students. In such a way, it would like to add to the current discussions on inclusive education and present ways of changing the higher education into a more equitable and socially just environment.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The phenomenon of tokenism has been widely studied in the fields of sociology, organizational studies, and education as a rather hidden but widespread process of exclusion working within the much-promised inclusive systems. Initially conceptualized by Kanter (1977), tokenism is the apparent incorporation of the oppressed into the mainstream without changing the order of things that perpetuate inequality. In teaching, tokenism occurs in the form of shallow diversity programs that focus on representation as opposed to participation, thus perpetuating hierarchy instead of ending it (Ahmed, 2012; Bell, 1992).

The discrepancy between access and equity has been criticized as a recent theme in scholarly discussions of inclusion. According to Kumar (2020), token inclusion tends to bring about stereotypes because it places marginalized students as exceptions and not as equals. This corresponds with the critiques of race put forward by critical race and decolonialists, which underscore the idea of inclusion, but not structural change that only allows power relations to rearrange and not challenge. At that, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) argue that in this respect, superficial inclusion has to sustain



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colonial logics within the educational realm, in which dominant epistemologies still marginalize indigenous knowledge systems in the name of diversity.

In the Indian context, tribal education literature indicates the existence of inequalities in the face of policy intervention to expand access. Virginius Xaxa (2008) shows that the tribal communities are disadvantaged structurally; this is because they have been marginalized historically, deprived of socio-economic and completely left out of the culture. Likewise, Ajit K. Mohanty (2011, 2019) stresses that language plays a key role in the educational inequality, and schooling in mainstream languages excludes tribal students and leads to poor academic performance. This evidence indicates that the affirmative action policies including reservations have led to a rise in the enrolment rates, but they have not effectively addressed the underlying concerns of participation, belonging and epistemic recognition (Deshpande, 2011).

One prominent theme that is realized through the literature is the epistemic marginalization idea where dominant knowledge systems marginalize or downplay the indigenous modes of knowing. This is conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) in his theory of cultural capital where he argues that, the cultural norms and knowledge promoted in educational institutions favor the dominant groups, which subsequently disadvantage the people in the marginal backgrounds. This point of view is furthered by the work of Miranda Frecker (2007), who comes up with the term epistemic injustice to explain how some people are not included in the production and validation of knowledge. When applied to tribal education, it leads to the loss of native knowledge systems and the introduction of foreign-established and predetermined curricula that do not reflect the lived experiences of students.

Critical pedagogy provides a valuable perspective on the way tokenism works in the education system. Paulo Freire (1970) contends that education is often used as a form of oppression in that it propagates the dominant ideologies, that is, by what he calls the banking model of education. In this respect, tokenistic inclusion does not do much to change the hierarchical quality of the knowledge production and dissemination. On the contrary, it supports the passive kinds of learning that exclude the voices and experiences of students. There is an expansion of this framework in the advocacy of culturally responsive and transformative pedagogies which focus on marginalized viewpoints by contemporary scholars (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The other major branch of literature is concerned with the psychosocial aspects of tokenism. Evidence suggests that, without any meaningful support systems, e.g., mentorship, peer networks, and institutional resources, the experience of isolation, anxiety and alienation can be further worsened in marginalized students (Steele, 1997; Walton and Cohen, 2011). Tribal students have to face a situation in higher education where they are underrepresented but at the same time are socially and academically underrepresented. This is in line with larger discoveries that lack of social support has a negative effect on well-being and participation, which is also present in research studies of vulnerable populations.

Moreover, the recent empirical evidence also emphasizes that institutional diversity policies are frequently not converted into inclusive practices. Ahmed (2012) observes that diversity programs are often performed to seem as a symbolic act that lets institutions pretend that they are inclusive, without doing anything about the structural inequities. On the same note, Gillborn (2005) states that inequality can be reproduced through policy frameworks because they emphasize outcomes but not structural processes. This can be seen in the Indian system of higher education whereby tribal students are not adequately represented in the faculty, curriculum management and governance structures, thus continuing to perpetuate tokenistic representation.

In general, the literature indicates that the problem of tokenism in education is not only a question of representation but a structural problem, which is part of larger socio-cultural and epistemic hierarchies. Although the policies have managed to make access better, the fact that cultural alienation, language barriers, and insufficient support systems still occur implies that the inclusion is still a mere formality. To tackle the issue of tokenism, then, involves a change of approach to quantitative inclusion into qualitative change, that is, including the elements of participation, recognition, and epistemic justice in educational institutions.



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## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To investigate whether tokenism in higher education exists.
2. To examine its influence on tribal students.
3. To determine ways of meaningful inclusion.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework adopted in this study relies on interdisciplinary theoretical framework that uses the critical pedagogy, cultural capital theory, and epistemic justice in exploring the structural and epistemological aspects of tokenism in higher education. All these theoretical approaches shed some light on the way in which institutional practices reproduce inequality despite their inclusion arguments.

### 1. Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is a conceptualize education that was created by Paulo Freire (1970) and it is aimed at creation of critical consciousness (conscientização) and social emancipation. Freire is critical of the traditional education system as it reproduces what he calls the banking model of education whereby knowledge is implanted into passive students to strengthen hierarchical relations of power. In this context, the tokenism is a paradox of emancipatory education since it perpetuates the mechanisms of domination and creates an illusion of inclusivity. Instead of empowering marginalized students to be active knowledge producers, tokenistic practices reduce both the participation and the voice of marginalized students. More recent researchers also believe that inclusion policies will become empty symbols that do not shift the status quo unless they are approached critically and transformed structurally (Giroux, 2020; Hooks, 2014).

### 2. Cultural Capital Theory

The idea of cultural capital as developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) can be used to critically analyze how learning institutions favor the cultural norms and practices of the dominant groups. According to Bourdieu, schools reproduce social inequalities because schools reward the linguistic styles, knowledge systems, and dispositions of dominant groups, and leaves poorly off students of marginalized backgrounds disadvantaged. The tribal students in the Indian higher education system are also known to be deprived of the means of cultural and symbolic capital which the academic establishment identifies, including the ability to use the dominant languages or knowledge of mainstream epistemologies. This leads to what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence whereby the foisting of dominant culture is accepted and internalized as legitimate. In this context, tokenism works by integrating the marginalized students into systems that still undermine their cultural identities and knowledge systems thus perpetuating structural exclusion (Reay, 2004).

### 3. Epistemic Justice

Miranda Fricker (2007) presented her view of epistemic justice in the framework, which further enriches the analysis through the emphasis on the ethics of knowledge production and recognition. Fricker states that there are two types of epistemic injustice, namely testimonial injustice, whereby the knowledge held by individuals is discredited by prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, in which marginalized groups do not have access to the interpretive resources to sense other experiences. With tribal students, the concept of tokenism has played a role in both of the types of injustices by not considering the indigenous perspectives on the curricula and academic discourse. Such epistemic marginalization does not only suppress tribal voices, but also the intellectual agency and identity of tribals. The researchers have suggested that to solve epistemic injustice, it is necessary to restructure knowledge systems radically to introduce various epistemologies and lived experiences (Santos, 2014).



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## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

In this paper, the qualitative secondary data analysis design is assumed, which allows taking a critical analysis of the literature on the topic, policy frameworks, and empirical research on the topic of tokenism and tribal inclusion in higher education. Secondary analysis is also more appropriate to conceptual and critical questions because it allows synthesizing various sources to promote the drawing up of new theoretical ideas (Johnston, 2017; Snyder, 2019). This method is consistent with interpretive and critical research paradigms which aim at revealing structural inequities incorporated into educational systems.

### Data Sources

The sources utilized to gather data were as varied as possible, among which are peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government reports (e.g., UGC, Ministry of Education, AISHE reports), and government policy documents (e.g., National Education Policy, 2020). The choice of these sources was guided by relevancy, credibility, and the role of the sources in explaining the problems of inclusion, marginalization and epistemic justice.

### Data Analysis

The analysis in the study is thematic and comparative, which aims at determining patterns, concepts and contradictions in tokenism in higher education which recur. The thematic analysis was performed according to the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) and the comparative analysis allowed to triangulate the results of the studies in different contexts and areas. Such a methodological solution provides the level of analytical rigor and strengthens the validity of interpretations (Nowell et al., 2017).

## MANIFESTATIONS OF TOKENISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- **Symbolic Representation:** Through the reservation policies, the presence of tribal students is usually symbolic. Their representation in leadership is being undermined, and they do not have meaningful academic and institutional interactions, which enhances marginality instead of empowerment (Kanter, 1977; Ahmed, 2012).
- **Curriculum Exclusion:** College education programs are mostly shaped by prevailing Western and upper caste epistemologies, disabling native knowledge systems. This results to epistemic injustice, such that tribal views are not incorporated in knowledge generation and verification (Fricker, 2007; Xaxa, 2008).
- **Language Barriers:** The prevalence of English and other major regional languages in the academic conversation poses a great problem to tribal students. Language marginalization restricts involvement opportunities, learning, and education (Mohanty, 2019).
- **Institutional Bias and Stereotyping:** Implicit bias, discrimination, and stereotyping often affect tribal students in the academic context. These experiences lead to the diminished self-confidence, stereotype threat, and psychological stress (Steele, 1997).
- **Limited Participation in Governance:** The number of tribal students in institutional decision making organs like academic councils and student governance structures is scanty and this limits their influence in policies that affect their educational experiences (Deshpande, 2011).
- **Lack of Support Systems:** Poor mentorship, academic advice and programs that respond to the culture add to the force of tokenism inclusion and cause isolation and decreased interaction (Walton and Cohen, 2011).



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## CHALLENGES FACED BY TRIBAL STUDENTS

- **Cultural Alienation:** The tribal students tend to feel disconnected with their own cultural backgrounds to the overriding institutional culture of the higher institutions of learning. Lack of culturally relevant pedagogy and the awareness of indigenous identities results in a sense of exclusion and marginal belonging (Xaxa, 2008; Sundar, 2016).
- **Language Difficulties:** The prevalence of English and mainstream regional languages poses a hindrance to the tribal students all of which are multilingual or non-dominant in lingual background. This language barrier has an impact on understanding, learning, and engagement in the classroom (Mohanty, 2019).
- **Economic Constraints:** The socio-economic advantage is still one of the formidable obstacles to block access to education tools, computer technologies, and permanent housing. Students are prone to financial insecurity and therefore, have to juggle between education and employment at the expense of education (Deshpande, 2011).
- **Lack of Mentorship and Academic Support:** Students of tribal backgrounds often have a low rate of access to mentorship, academic advice, and institutional support. The lack of support frameworks is also a source of disengagement and reduced retention rates (Walton and Cohen, 2011).
- **Psychological Stress and Identity Conflict:** The psychological stress, anxiety, and identity conflict may arise due to discrimination, stereotyping, and marginalization. Stereotype threat is also a phenomenon that diminishes academic confidence and performance (Steele, 1997).
- **Digital Divide:** The inequality in access to digital infrastructure and technological tools enhances educational inequality, especially when it comes to online and blended classrooms (UNESCO, 2021).

These difficulties echo much larger systemic problems of poor support structures that strengthen the trend towards marginalization of other vulnerable groups.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

- **Quantitative vs. Qualitative Inclusion:** Accessibility due to reservation policies has led to growth in enrolment of tribal students; though accessibility is mostly quantitative. Few signs of significant involvement, academic inclusion, or fair learning are apparent (Deshpande, 2011; Xaxa, 2008).
- **Sense of Isolation and Marginality:** The aspect of tokenistic inclusion also leads to social and academic isolation of tribal students. In spite of the institutional presence, absence of belonging and peer integration have a negative impact on engagement and persistence (Walton and Cohen, 2011).
- **Lack of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:** Dominating curricula do not reveal indigenous knowledge systems which leads to epistemic disconnection. This decreases the academic activity and strengthens the cultural alienation (Gay, 2018; Mohanty, 2019).
- **Inadequate Institutional Support Systems:** Restricted access to mentoring, academic counseling and psychosocial services worsen the inequalities that already exist and impacts retention and performance (Steele, 1997).
- **Weak Policy Implementation:** Despite the policies on inclusion, like the National Education Policy (2020), they have been implemented widely, but this has not been consistent because of institutional differences and the lack of awareness and administrative inefficiencies (Government of India, 2020).



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## Discussion

The results indicate that tokenism is a structural process and not a process of inclusion. Policies are meant to democratize access although limited in their implementation and insensitivity to context limits their transformative power. This is representative of wider criticisms in the field of critical pedagogy, of which educational establishments reproduce the status quos of power rather than confronting them (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2020).

In addition, tokenism leads to epistemic injustice as defined by Miranda Fricker (2007) as it is systematic, given that it has blocked tribal bodies of knowledge in learning opportunities and academic conversations. This marginalization compromises the intellectual agency of tribal students and creates the epistemological dominance. On the same note, the concept of cultural capital as formulated by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) describes how the institutional norms favor dominant types of culture, and tribal students are at a structural disadvantage.

Notably, the continuation of tokenism makes inclusion a performative act where diversity is being demonstrated without any change (Ahmed, 2012). Representation in absence of meaningful participation will not bring equity. The lack of a culturally responsive program and a strong system of support only intensifies the process of marginalization, strengthening the circles of marginalization.

Thus, the discussion highlights the fact that we should stop considering symbolic inclusion and move towards transformative inclusion where learning institutions serve as active participants in issues relating to power, culture and knowledge. To respond to the issue of tokenism, it is not only policy that should change but also the epistemology and pedagogy so that the tribal students may not just be present in higher education but empowered to be equal members of it.

## SUGGESTIONS

- **Promote Culturally Responsive Pedagogy:** Universities and colleges must embrace culturally responsive learning experiences that acknowledge and assimilate the socio-cultural contexts of students in learning. These strategies promote interest, identity, and educational achievements among disadvantaged students (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).
- **Incorporate Tribal Knowledge in Curriculum:** Curricula should not be confined to prevailing epistemologies so that indigenous and tribal knowledge systems can be adopted. Epistemic injustice and the subsequent development of knowledge inclusivity are impossible without this integration (Santos, 2014; Miranda Fricker, 2007).
- **Strengthen Mentorship and Support Systems:** The institutions must also put well-organized mentorship programs, peer support networks, and tribal student-specific counseling services. There is evidence that these support systems have a great impact on retention, well-being, and academic performance (Walton and Cohen, 2011).
- **Enhance Policy Implementation Mechanisms:** As much as we have inclusive policies, the application of these policies requires proper implementation, monitoring and accountability. The institutional frameworks should provide transparency in a bid to implement equity measures actively (Government of India, 2020).
- **Encourage Representation in Decision-Making:** Heightened tribal involvement in academic governance and policy formulation institutions can help to make sure that the institutions practices capture heterogeneous views and solve issues that have community-related demands (Xaxa, 2008).
- **Address Language Barriers through Multilingual Education:** Multilingual strategies should be promoted in tertiary learning institutions to reduce language inequality and raise the frequency of tribal learners (Mohanty, 2019).



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- **Develop Inclusive Institutional Environments:** Universities should be able to promote inclusive campus through anti-discrimination policies, diversity training programs and community outreach programs that should encourage equity and social justice (Ahmed, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

In education, tokenism still continues to be a major impediment in realizing substantive inclusion in the Indian higher education, especially among the tribal students. Although affirmative action policies (i.e. reservations) have increased accessibility, the continued symbolic inclusion without equal structural change constrains such measures (Deshpande, 2011; Xaxa, 2008). This research indicates that tokenism has institutional, pedagogical, and epistemic processes that reinstate inequality, marginalization, and exclusion even though institutions only make formal commitments towards diversity.

This analysis brings out the fact that inclusion should not be interpreted as access alone, but as meaningful participation, recognition and empowerment. Ongoing hegemony of a standard culture, silencing of indigenous knowledge systems, and poor support systems are all factors that lead to what Miranda Fricker (2007) theorizes as epistemic injustice. On the same note, the cultural capital framework as posited by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) reveals how the educational systems favor majority knowledge structures at the expense of tribal learners and how the system perpetuates structural disparities.

In addition, the continuation of tokenistic measures is indicative of larger systems problems in higher education where the policies are in most cases a performance promise but not a transformation tool (Ahmed, 2012). Inclusion would be a shallow practice unless it tackled some inherent power relations and institutional biases that would not yield equitable results. In this aspect, critical pedagogy advocates the importance of transformational educational ideas that oppose hegemonic designs and advance social justice (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011).

Institutions of higher learning should take a comprehensive and transformative strategy involving the incorporation of culturally responsive pedagogy, epistemic pluralism, and inclusive systems of governance to outgrow tokenism. The need to build up support systems, proper policy implementation and creation of authentic involvement of tribal students in academic and institutional processes will be key to the attainment of educational equity.

To sum up, meaningful inclusion involves changing the notion of representation to recognition and redistribution of power in learning spaces. It will only be possible to transform higher education to be a truly inclusive space that can empower tribal students to be active contributors of knowledge and society only on the basis of long-term structural and epistemic changes.

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