

**BETWEEN CLASSROOM AND FOREST: EDUCATIONAL
DISPLACEMENT AND CULTURAL DISCONNECTION
AMONG TRIBAL STUDENTS IN NILAMBUR**

MSW DISASTER MANAGEMENT

2024 – 2026

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Course Code: SWDM 547

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ABSTRACT

Education has increasingly become an important pathway for improving the social and economic wellbeing of tribal communities. However, while mainstream education creates opportunities for learning, mobility, and empowerment, it may also influence indigenous language, cultural identity, traditional knowledge, and community relationships. Although previous research has examined issues such as educational access, exclusion, and residential schooling among tribal communities, limited attention has been given to understanding these experiences from the perspectives of tribal students themselves. This study, *Between Classroom and Forest: Educational Displacement and Cultural Disconnection among Tribal Students in Nilambur*, explores the lived experiences of students belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities.

The study adopted a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological research design to understand participants' experiences of mainstream education in relation to their cultural identity and community life. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data were collected using in-depth interviews supported by field observation. The data were analysed through thematic analysis.

The findings indicate that participants viewed education as a valuable means of personal growth, employment, and social mobility. At the same time, they described experiences related to language barriers, hostel adjustment, changing patterns of community interaction, reduced participation in certain indigenous cultural practices, and concerns regarding the gradual decline of indigenous language and ecological knowledge among younger generations. Rather than presenting education as a cause of cultural disconnection, the study highlights the complex ways in which participants negotiated educational aspirations alongside attachment to their language, identity, and community. The findings further emphasize the importance of culturally responsive education that recognises indigenous knowledge systems, promotes mother tongue learning, and encourages community participation. The study concludes that educational inclusion and cultural continuity are complementary goals and that meaningful education should enable tribal students to progress academically without distancing them from their cultural heritage.

Keywords: Tribal education, Educational displacement, Cultural disconnection, Indigenous knowledge, Phenomenology, Inclusive education, Nilambur.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as an important means of social development, empowerment, and inclusion, particularly for historically marginalised communities. In India, formal education has long been promoted as a pathway through which Scheduled Tribes and other socially excluded groups can improve literacy, employment opportunities, social mobility, and participation within mainstream society. Government policies, residential schooling systems, scholarships, and tribal welfare programmes have increasingly focused on expanding educational access among tribal populations, especially among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Although these initiatives have improved school enrolment and literacy levels in many tribal regions, educational inclusion has not always ensured cultural inclusion (Nambissan, 1994; Mohanty, 2006).

For many indigenous communities, learning traditionally occurs through everyday life, community participation, and close interaction with the natural environment. Knowledge is often transmitted through observation, storytelling, participation in daily activities, oral traditions, and relationships with elders rather than through formal classroom instruction. Indigenous learning systems include ecological knowledge related to forests, medicinal plants, food gathering, seasonal changes, wildlife behaviour, healing practices, and sustainable survival methods developed through generations of lived experience. Scholars such as Warren (1991) and Battiste (2002) explain that indigenous knowledge systems are not merely collections of traditional practices, but important intellectual and cultural systems closely connected with identity, memory, belonging, and relationships with land and environment.

However, processes such as modernization, institutional education, globalization, and changing social structures have increasingly influenced indigenous ways of life across India. Mainstream schooling systems generally function through dominant regional languages, standardized curricula, institutional routines, and educational practices that may differ significantly from indigenous cultural realities. Research on tribal education in India has repeatedly shown that many tribal students experience schools as linguistically unfamiliar and culturally distant spaces, especially when classroom teaching does not reflect their language, environment, and lived experiences (Nambissan, 1994; UNESCO, 2020). In such situations, education may influence not only academic learning but also language use, identity formation, cultural continuity, and relationships between younger generations and traditional systems of knowledge.

Several scholars have argued that mainstream educational systems often encourage adaptation to dominant social and cultural norms while giving limited recognition to indigenous languages, ecological knowledge, and community-based learning practices (Mohanty & Panda, 2017). As tribal children spend increasing amounts of time in schools, hostels, and outside social environments, opportunities for learning through participation in community life gradually reduce. Over time, this can weaken oral traditions, intergenerational knowledge transmission, mother tongue use, and everyday engagement with indigenous ecological practices. Gupta and Padel (2018) further observe that residential schooling systems in India may unintentionally create forms of cultural alienation by separating tribal children from their social and cultural environments during important stages of childhood.

The concept of educational displacement becomes important in understanding these experiences. The present study uses the term “educational displacement” to describe the emotional, linguistic, and cultural distancing experienced by tribal students within mainstream educational environments. In this context, educational displacement does not refer only to physical movement from settlements to schools or hostels, but also to the gradual weakening of connection with indigenous language, ecological knowledge systems, oral traditions, cultural practices, and community belonging that may emerge through mainstream educational processes. This does not suggest that education itself is harmful. Rather, it highlights how educational structures that fail to recognise indigenous language, identity, and knowledge systems may create tension between educational mobility and cultural belonging.

Tribal students therefore often find themselves negotiating between two different social worlds one shaped by institutional education, dominant language use, and mainstream expectations, and another rooted in indigenous identity, oral traditions, collective memory, and community life.

These tensions are increasingly visible among tribal communities in Nilambur, particularly among the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities. Traditionally, these communities maintained close relationships with forests and possessed extensive ecological knowledge regarding medicinal plants, honey collection, food gathering, forest navigation, wildlife behaviour, and sustainable living practices. Learning historically occurred through direct participation in everyday activities, observation of elders, storytelling, and interaction with the natural environment.

However, over the years, increasing exposure to formal schooling, hostel education, settlement programmes, modernization, and outside social environments has brought significant social and cultural transformations within these communities.

Younger generations today are increasingly exposed to Malayalam-medium education, institutional routines, digital technology, and mainstream cultural influences. While these changes have created opportunities for literacy, awareness, employment aspirations, and social mobility, they have also contributed to visible changes in language use, childhood experiences, social interaction, and cultural learning practices. Many younger community members now spend less time participating in forest-based activities, interacting closely with elders, and learning indigenous practices through everyday experience. At the same time, several tribal students continue to experience language barriers, cultural adjustment difficulties, silence, hesitation, identity insecurity, and emotional disconnection while moving between mainstream educational spaces and community life.

Existing studies on tribal education in India have largely focused on issues such as educational access, dropout rates, poverty, policy implementation, and language barriers. Although these studies provide important insights, fewer studies have examined how tribal students themselves emotionally experience cultural disconnection, identity negotiation, and weakening relationships with indigenous knowledge while adapting to mainstream educational systems. Similarly, limited qualitative research has focused specifically on the lived experiences of tribal students from Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur and the cultural consequences of mainstream schooling within their everyday lives.

The present study, titled *“Between Classroom and Forest: Educational Displacement and Cultural Disconnection among Tribal Students in Nilambur,”* emerges from these concerns. The study seeks to explore how mainstream schooling influences indigenous language use, ecological knowledge, cultural identity, emotional belonging, and intergenerational learning among tribal students in Nilambur. By focusing on the lived experiences, perceptions, and emotional realities of tribal students and community members, the study attempts to critically understand the relationship between formal education, cultural continuity, and indigenous identity within contemporary tribal life.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Education is widely regarded as an important means of empowerment, social mobility, and social inclusion, particularly for historically marginalized communities. In Kerala, various educational policies, tribal welfare programmes, residential schools, hostels, and scholarship schemes have been introduced to improve educational access among tribal populations, including Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Although these initiatives have increased school enrolment and literacy levels in many tribal regions, educational inclusion has not always resulted in cultural inclusion. Several tribal students continue to experience difficulties within mainstream educational environments that often fail to recognise their language, cultural background, indigenous knowledge systems, and lived realities.

Most formal educational institutions in Kerala function through Malayalam-medium instruction and standardized curricula shaped around dominant social and cultural frameworks. For many tribal students, particularly those from indigenous communities in Nilambur, the language of schooling, classroom interaction, institutional discipline, and hostel life may feel socially, emotionally, and culturally unfamiliar. Earlier studies have shown that when educational systems fail to reflect children's linguistic and cultural environment, students often experience silence, hesitation, low classroom participation, insecurity, and alienation within school spaces (Nambissan, 1994; Mohanty, 2006). In many cases, tribal students struggle not because of lack of ability, but because formal schooling remains disconnected from their cultural and linguistic realities.

These tensions are increasingly visible among tribal communities such as the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur. Traditionally, these communities maintained close relationships with forests and possessed rich indigenous knowledge related to medicinal plants, honey collection, food gathering, forest navigation, healing practices, and sustainable survival methods. Knowledge was historically transmitted through oral traditions, observation, participation in everyday activities, and interaction with elders and the natural environment. However, increasing exposure to formal schooling, hostel education, modernization, digital media, and outside social environments has gradually altered the everyday experiences of younger generations.

As tribal students spend increasing amounts of time within institutional educational settings and less time participating in community life, opportunities for learning indigenous practices and interacting closely with elders continue to reduce. Along with educational adjustment, many students experience

gradual weakening of mother tongue use, reduced engagement with forest-based knowledge, and emotional distance from cultural practices and settlement life.

Several students therefore grow up negotiating between mainstream educational expectations and indigenous community identity, often experiencing uncertainty regarding belonging, language, and cultural continuity.

Existing studies on tribal education in India have largely focused on issues such as educational access, poverty, dropout rates, language barriers, and policy implementation. Although these studies provide important insights, fewer studies have examined the emotional and cultural consequences of mainstream schooling among tribal students, particularly among vulnerable indigenous communities in Kerala. Limited qualitative research has explored how tribal students themselves experience educational displacement, cultural disconnection, identity negotiation, weakening oral traditions, and changing relationships with indigenous knowledge while adapting to formal educational systems. Similarly, there remains limited understanding regarding how younger generations from Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities perceive the gradual cultural transformations taking place within their everyday lives.

Therefore, the present study seeks to examine how mainstream schooling influences indigenous language use, ecological knowledge, cultural identity, emotional belonging, and intergenerational learning among tribal students in Nilambur. The study attempts to understand how tribal students experience educational displacement and cultural disconnection while moving between institutional educational spaces and indigenous community life. By focusing on the lived experiences and perspectives of tribal students and community members, the study seeks to critically explore the complex relationship between formal education, modernization, cultural continuity, and indigenous identity.

1.3 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

India is home to one of the largest indigenous populations in the world, with hundreds of tribal communities possessing distinct languages, cultural traditions, ecological knowledge systems, and social practices. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Scheduled Tribes constitute an important part of India's social and cultural diversity, while Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) represent communities facing severe socio-economic vulnerability, low literacy levels, geographical isolation, and declining traditional livelihoods (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014).

Over the years, the Indian state has introduced several educational and welfare programmes aimed at improving literacy, school participation, and social inclusion among tribal populations.

Residential schools, hostel facilities, scholarship schemes, and special educational programmes have become central components of tribal development policy across different states, including Kerala.

Kerala is often recognised for its high literacy rate and educational achievements compared to many other Indian states. However, tribal communities in Kerala continue to experience significant educational and social inequalities despite the state's overall developmental progress. Research on tribal education in Kerala has repeatedly shown that tribal students experience lower educational attainment, high dropout rates, language barriers, limited cultural representation within curriculum, and difficulties adjusting to mainstream educational environments (Joseph & Mathew, 2019). Although educational access has improved over the years, many scholars argue that the existing educational system still functions largely through dominant cultural and linguistic frameworks that may not adequately reflect the realities of indigenous communities.

The present study is situated in Nilambur, a forest region in Malappuram district that is home to several tribal communities, including the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities. Both communities historically maintained close relationships with forests and depended significantly on forest-based livelihoods, ecological knowledge, oral traditions, and collective community life. Traditionally, knowledge within these communities was transmitted informally through participation in everyday activities, observation of elders, storytelling, rituals, and interaction with the natural environment. Forests were not understood merely as economic resources but as spaces deeply connected with identity, belonging, memory, and survival.

The Cholanayikkans are recognised as one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in Kerala and are historically known for their close association with forest environments in Nilambur. Earlier studies describe the community as having distinct linguistic practices, strong ecological knowledge, and relatively limited interaction with mainstream society for long periods of time (Kumar, 2014). Similarly, the Kattunayakan community also possesses rich indigenous knowledge related to forests, honey collection, medicinal plants, wildlife behaviour, and food gathering practices. For both communities, everyday life historically involved strong interaction between children, elders, forests, rivers, and community-based learning systems.

However, over the years, major social and cultural changes have emerged within these communities due to settlement programmes, formal education, modernization, welfare interventions, media

exposure, and increasing interaction with mainstream society. Residential schooling and hostel education have particularly influenced the lives of younger generations.

Many tribal children today spend significant periods away from their settlements while pursuing formal education in Malayalam-medium institutions. Although these opportunities have improved literacy, educational mobility, and exposure to wider society, they have also altered patterns of language use, childhood experiences, cultural learning, and relationships between younger generations and indigenous knowledge systems.

Several studies on tribal education in India have pointed out that mainstream educational institutions often operate through cultural assumptions that differ from indigenous ways of learning and living (Mohanty & Panda, 2017). Classroom teaching generally prioritises standardized curriculum, textbook-based instruction, dominant regional languages, and institutional discipline, while indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and ecological practices remain largely excluded from formal educational structures. For many tribal students, this creates educational environments that feel socially and culturally unfamiliar. Earlier research has shown that such experiences may contribute to silence, hesitation, identity insecurity, low classroom participation, and emotional alienation among tribal students (Nambissan, 1994).

In addition to educational adjustment, younger generations within tribal communities are also experiencing broader lifestyle changes associated with modernization and outside exposure. Technology, social media, changing food habits, market dependence, and reduced interaction with elders are gradually influencing everyday life within settlements. Several traditional practices related to language, oral storytelling, medicinal knowledge, forest survival skills, and collective community interaction are weakening as younger generations spend increasing amounts of time within institutional and digital environments. Participants in the present study repeatedly described concerns regarding the gradual loss of indigenous knowledge, reduced use of mother tongue, weakening intergenerational learning, and emotional disconnection from settlement life among younger community members.

At the same time, the study also recognises that education has created important opportunities for tribal youth. Many students and families view education as necessary for employment, financial security, social dignity, and survival within wider society. Younger generations increasingly aspire towards higher education, professional careers, and greater social mobility. Therefore, the experiences of tribal students cannot be understood simply through a framework of cultural loss alone.

Rather, their lives reflect continuous negotiation between educational aspirations, modernization, indigenous identity, cultural continuity, and emotional belonging.

It is within this broader social and educational context that the present study emerged. The study seeks to understand how tribal students from Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur experience mainstream schooling and how these experiences influence language, identity, ecological knowledge, emotional belonging, and relationships with indigenous community life. By focusing on lived experiences and cultural transformation within everyday life, the study attempts to contribute towards a deeper understanding of educational displacement and cultural disconnection among tribal students in contemporary Kerala.

1.4 RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The present study is significant because it examines tribal education not only as a question of literacy, enrolment, or educational access, but also as a process deeply connected with identity, language, emotional belonging, indigenous knowledge systems, and cultural continuity. Discussions on tribal education in India have often focused primarily on structural concerns such as poverty, dropout rates, welfare schemes, and educational inequality. While these issues remain important, such approaches sometimes overlook the emotional and cultural experiences of tribal students within mainstream educational systems. This study therefore becomes important because it shifts attention from education as a purely institutional process to education as a lived social and cultural experience. By focusing on the voices and lived realities of tribal students themselves, the research contributes towards a deeper understanding of how mainstream schooling shapes identity, belonging, and relationships with indigenous culture among younger generations.

The study is particularly relevant in the context of Nilambur, where tribal communities such as the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities are experiencing rapid social and cultural transformation due to formal education, hostel life, modernization, technological exposure, and increasing interaction with mainstream society. Although educational opportunities have expanded over the years, these changes have also influenced language use, relationships with elders, childhood experiences, ecological learning, oral traditions, and community-based ways of life.

This study becomes important because it documents these ongoing transformations during a critical period of social change within indigenous communities.

By examining these experiences from the perspectives of tribal students and community members, the research helps understand how educational mobility and cultural disconnection may exist simultaneously within the lives of younger generations.

The study is academically significant because it contributes to the limited qualitative and phenomenological literature on educational displacement and cultural disconnection among tribal students in Kerala. Existing research on tribal education has largely concentrated on educational access, policy implementation, language barriers, poverty, and dropout patterns. Comparatively fewer studies have explored how tribal students emotionally experience silence, hesitation, identity insecurity, weakening cultural belonging, and disconnection from indigenous knowledge while adapting to mainstream educational systems. This study therefore contributes a more human-centred and experiential understanding of tribal education by focusing on lived experiences, emotional realities, and everyday negotiations between institutional schooling and indigenous community life.

The phenomenological nature of the study further adds to its uniqueness and relevance. Rather than studying tribal education only through statistics, policy analysis, or institutional perspectives, the research prioritises the personal experiences, memories, emotions, and reflections of tribal students themselves. This becomes important because many dimensions of educational displacement such as silence in classrooms, fear of judgement, identity negotiation, emotional distance from community life, and gradual disconnection from indigenous practices cannot be fully understood through quantitative approaches alone. By documenting how students themselves interpret and experience these changes, the study contributes towards a deeper understanding of the emotional and cultural dimensions of education among indigenous communities.

Another important contribution of the study lies in its focus on indigenous ecological knowledge and intergenerational learning. The findings show that younger generations are increasingly spending less time participating in forest-based activities and learning traditional practices through interaction with elders. As a result, several forms of oral knowledge related to forests, medicinal plants, food practices, survival skills, storytelling, and community traditions are gradually weakening. This study becomes significant because it highlights how educational and social transformation may influence not only language and identity, but also relationships between younger generations and indigenous systems of ecological understanding. In this way, the research contributes towards broader discussions on cultural preservation, indigenous knowledge systems, and the social consequences of modernization within tribal communities.

The study also contributes to discussions on language, education, and cultural inclusion. Many tribal students enter schools where Malayalam functions as the dominant language of communication and instruction, while their mother tongue and cultural knowledge receive little representation within classroom spaces. Through the experiences shared by participants, the research helps understand how language barriers may influence classroom participation, confidence, emotional wellbeing, and sense of belonging among tribal students. The study therefore has important implications for culturally responsive education, mother tongue-based learning, and inclusive curriculum development for indigenous communities.

From a policy and practice perspective, the study is relevant for educators, curriculum developers, social workers, tribal welfare institutions, and policymakers working in the field of indigenous education and community development. The findings may help institutions better understand the emotional and cultural challenges experienced by tribal students within mainstream schooling systems. This study therefore supports the need for educational approaches that recognise indigenous languages, ecological knowledge, community histories, and cultural identities rather than treating tribal students only through mainstream institutional frameworks. The research also highlights the importance of creating educational spaces that promote emotional security, dignity, confidence, and cultural affirmation among indigenous children.

From a social work perspective, the study is particularly important because it draws attention to the psychosocial dimensions of education among marginalized communities. Tribal students often navigate complex experiences related to discrimination, silence, adjustment, identity insecurity, emotional belonging, and cultural transition while moving between institutional educational environments and indigenous community life.

Understanding these experiences becomes important for developing culturally sensitive interventions, community-based support systems, and socially inclusive educational practices that respect indigenous identity and collective wellbeing. The study also contributes to broader discussions on social justice, cultural rights, and inclusive development among marginalized indigenous communities.

Finally, the study is significant because it documents the voices, memories, concerns, and aspirations of tribal students and community members during a period of rapid cultural transformation. At a time when indigenous languages, oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and community-based learning

systems are gradually weakening, the study attempts to preserve and critically understand these experiences within contemporary educational contexts.

Rather than presenting tribal communities only as passive victims of change, the research highlights the complex ways in which younger generations negotiate between educational aspirations, modernization, cultural continuity, and indigenous identity.

In doing so, the study contributes towards wider academic and social discussions on education, cultural belonging, indigenous knowledge, and the future of tribal communities within changing social realities.

1.5 CHAPTERISATION

The Chapterization of the dissertation is as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Review of literature

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 4: Case Description

Chapter 5: Thematic Analysis and Discussion

Chapter 6: Findings, Suggestions and Conclusion

References and Annexure's will be in following Chapter

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The review of literature for the present study focuses on existing research related to tribal education, educational exclusion, language and identity, residential schooling, indigenous knowledge systems, cultural change, and emotional experiences of tribal students within mainstream educational environments. The reviewed studies include academic books, journal articles, government reports, policy documents, and research conducted on tribal communities in India and Kerala. Particular attention has been given to literature discussing language barriers, hostel education, cultural assimilation, indigenous identity, educational displacement, and the relationship between schooling and community life among tribal populations.

Research on indigenous and tribal education has increasingly highlighted the complex relationship between formal schooling and cultural identity. Scholars have argued that mainstream education often operates through dominant cultural frameworks that overlook indigenous languages, knowledge systems, and community practices. Nambissan (1994) observed that tribal children frequently encounter educational environments that do not reflect their socio-cultural realities, leading to difficulties in participation and learning. Similarly, Battiste (2002) emphasized that educational systems often privilege dominant forms of knowledge while marginalizing indigenous ways of knowing, resulting in the gradual weakening of cultural identity and community connections among indigenous learners.

Several studies have further examined the cultural consequences of schooling among indigenous communities. Morarji (2014) introduced the concept of educational displacement to explain how formal education may create psychological and cultural distance between students and their local communities. According to the author, schooling often promotes aspirations, values, and lifestyles associated with dominant social groups and urban social groups leading students to become detached from traditional knowledge systems and community life. Such experiences may create tensions in identity formation and feelings of belonging among tribal youth.

The literature further reflects growing academic concern regarding the emotional and cultural dimensions of mainstream education among indigenous communities. Several scholars have pointed out that tribal students often experience forms of exclusion that extend beyond economic disadvantage or lack of educational access (Nambissan, 1994)

Existing research repeatedly highlights issues related to dominant-language education, weakening mother tongue use, cultural disconnection, loss of indigenous knowledge systems, emotional insecurity, and difficulties in adjusting to institutional educational environments. At the same time, many studies also emphasize the importance of culturally responsive education, multilingual learning, and educational practices that recognize indigenous realities and community knowledge systems.

The reviewed literature has been organized thematically in order to understand the major patterns, concerns, and conceptual discussions emerging across earlier studies. The themes discussed in this chapter include tribal education and educational exclusion, residential schooling and cultural assimilation, indigenous knowledge and ecological learning, modernization and cultural change, identity and emotional belonging, inclusive education, and educational displacement among tribal students. These themes provide the conceptual background for understanding the lived experiences of tribal students from Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur, which form the focus of the present phenomenological study

The present study draws upon these scholarly discussions to examine the lived experiences of tribal students from Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur. By exploring educational displacement, cultural disconnection, indigenous knowledge, and inclusive education, the study seeks to understand how mainstream schooling influences identity, belonging, and community relationships among tribal learners. The reviewed literature provides the conceptual and empirical foundation for interpreting these experiences within the broader context of tribal education in India.

2.2 THEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.2.1 Tribal Education and Educational Exclusion

Education among tribal communities in India has remained an important area of academic discussion, particularly in relation to marginalization, exclusion, inequality, and social mobility. Although constitutional safeguards, tribal welfare programmes, residential schools, scholarship schemes, and literacy missions have expanded educational access among Scheduled Tribes, several scholars argue that tribal students continue to experience deeper forms of exclusion within mainstream educational systems. Existing literature therefore suggests that educational inequality among tribal communities cannot be understood merely through school enrolment or literacy statistics alone.

Rather, exclusion often operates through language, curriculum, institutional structures, cultural invisibility, and unequal power relations within educational spaces.

Tribal communities in India have historically faced multiple barriers in accessing quality education. Although government initiatives such as Ashram schools, residential hostels, scholarships, and special welfare programmes have improved enrolment rates, educational outcomes among many tribal groups continue to remain comparatively low. Researchers have observed that educational exclusion among tribal students is not merely a question of physical access to schools but also involves issues related to language, curriculum relevance, socio-cultural differences, discrimination, and limited representation of tribal knowledge within educational institutions. As a result, many tribal learners continue to experience challenges in participation, retention, and academic achievement despite increased educational opportunities.

One of the foundational contributions in this area is the work of Nambissan (1994), who critically examined the relationship between language and schooling among tribal children in India. The study argues that formal schooling systems are largely structured around dominant linguistic and cultural frameworks that rarely reflect the realities of tribal communities. According to Nambissan, many tribal children enter classrooms where the language of instruction, patterns of communication, and classroom expectations are unfamiliar from the very beginning. As a result, children often become “silent participants” within classroom spaces, not because of intellectual inability, but because they are unable to fully engage with a learning environment disconnected from their linguistic and cultural world. The study further explains that tribal children are frequently labelled as “slow learners” or academically weak without adequate recognition of the structural disadvantages created by dominant-language education. This argument is highly relevant to the present study, where several participants described hesitation in classroom interaction, fear of speaking Malayalam, low participation, and feelings of emotional discomfort within educational institutions. However, while Nambissan’s work strongly explains structural and linguistic exclusion, the study gives comparatively less attention to how these experiences influence emotional belonging, cultural identity, and relationships with indigenous knowledge systems in everyday life. The present research attempts to address this gap through a phenomenological exploration of tribal students’ lived experiences.

Nambissan’s analysis demonstrates that educational exclusion among tribal children extends beyond issues of enrolment and attendance. The study emphasizes that when schooling fails to acknowledge students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds, learning becomes a process of adjustment to unfamiliar norms rather than meaningful participation. This cultural mismatch may affect students’ confidence, classroom engagement, and sense of belonging within educational institutions.

Such insights are particularly relevant to the present study, which seeks to understand how tribal students experience educational environments that may not adequately reflect their cultural identities and everyday realities.

Similar concerns are visible in studies focusing specifically on tribal education in Kerala. Ambily's work on the educational experiences of tribal students in Kerala highlights that increased educational access has not necessarily reduced educational inequality among indigenous communities. The study identifies multiple barriers affecting tribal students, including poverty, geographical isolation, lack of transportation, hostel adjustment difficulties, low parental literacy, and culturally insensitive teaching practices. Importantly, the study argues that educational participation should not be measured only through school attendance because many tribal children continue to experience forms of exclusion even after entering educational institutions. Ambily further observes that classroom curriculum and teaching methods often remain disconnected from tribal children's lived realities, resulting in low classroom engagement and weak emotional attachment towards schooling. This literature is important to the present study because participants from Nilambur similarly described educational spaces as socially unfamiliar and emotionally difficult environments that required constant adjustment. At the same time, Ambily's work primarily focuses on structural educational barriers and institutional inequality, while the emotional experiences of cultural disconnection and identity negotiation among tribal youth remain comparatively underexplored.

The report *Drop Out of Adivasi Children from Schools in Kerala* prepared by Neethi Vedhi provides another important perspective on tribal educational exclusion within Kerala. Based on field observations from regions including Nilambur, Wayanad, and Attappady, the report argues that dropout among tribal children cannot be explained solely through poverty or lack of educational interest. Instead, the report highlights how "culturally alien" educational environments contribute significantly to disengagement from schooling. According to the report, tribal students frequently encounter curriculum irrelevance, language barriers, discrimination, social exclusion, and emotional insecurity within mainstream educational institutions. The report further explains that many tribal children gradually develop low self-confidence because their language, identity, and community knowledge receive little recognition within schools. Importantly, the study recommends culturally responsive educational reforms such as inclusion of tribal resource persons, community participation, and curriculum connected with indigenous realities. This report strongly supports the arguments of the present research because participants repeatedly described how mainstream educational systems often ignored their language, settlement life, and cultural experiences.

However, while the report effectively critiques structural educational exclusion, it does not deeply explore how tribal students themselves emotionally interpret and negotiate these experiences within their personal lives.

Manojan (2018), in his study among Paniya tribes in Kerala, argues that educational exclusion cannot be understood only through issues of enrolment and access. The study highlights that many tribal children experience difficulties because school environments often fail to recognize their indigenous knowledge systems, language, and cultural realities. According to the author, curriculum content frequently remains culturally unfamiliar to tribal students, creating a sense of “otherness” within educational spaces and reducing meaningful engagement with learning processes. The study further notes that tribal students often face difficulties in understanding classroom subjects because educational content and teaching practices remain disconnected from their lived experiences and community knowledge systems. Importantly, teachers and students in the study expressed support for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge within the curriculum, suggesting that culturally relevant education may strengthen participation and learning among tribal children.

These observations are highly relevant to the present study because participants similarly described mainstream educational environments as socially unfamiliar spaces that required constant adjustment and often provided limited recognition to their language, culture, and everyday realities. However, while Manojan’s study focuses primarily on indigenous knowledge and curriculum relevance, the emotional experiences of educational displacement, cultural disconnection, and identity negotiation among tribal students remain comparatively underexplored.

Another significant contribution comes from the Government of Kerala’s report *Analysis of Performance of Model Residential Schools in Kerala* (2019), which critically evaluates residential schooling systems established for tribal students. The report identifies multiple institutional and emotional challenges experienced by tribal children within residential educational environments, including homesickness, language difficulties, loneliness, low classroom participation, emotional stress, and weak psychosocial support systems. Importantly, the report argues that hostel education often creates physical and emotional separation between children and their families, community environment, language practices, and indigenous ways of life. The study further explains that residential schooling systems largely operate through institutional routines and dominant social norms that rarely reflect tribal rhythms of life, ecological learning systems, or cultural practices. As a result, many students gradually experience weakening relationships with mother tongue, oral traditions, and community-based learning.

This literature becomes highly relevant to the present study because participants repeatedly spoke about emotional separation from settlement life, reduced interaction with elders, weakening cultural participation, and adjustment difficulties associated with hostel education. However, although the report clearly identifies institutional problems, it provides comparatively limited insight into how tribal students themselves emotionally understand these experiences of cultural transition and educational displacement.

Overall, existing literature on tribal education and educational exclusion demonstrates that tribal students often face forms of marginalization that extend beyond economic disadvantage or limited educational access. The reviewed studies collectively show that mainstream educational systems frequently function through dominant linguistic, cultural, and institutional frameworks that may unintentionally marginalize indigenous students and weaken their connection with community life, oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and indigenous identity. At the same time, the literature also reveals an important gap regarding the phenomenological and emotional experiences of tribal students themselves, particularly in relation to educational displacement, identity negotiation, cultural disconnection, and weakening intergenerational knowledge systems within contemporary educational environments. The present study attempts to contribute towards this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of tribal students from Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur and by examining how mainstream schooling shapes their relationships with language, culture, identity, and indigenous belonging.

2.2.2 Residential Schooling and Cultural Assimilation

Residential schools and hostels have become an important part of tribal education in India, especially in remote forest and hill regions where nearby schools are limited. Institutions such as Ashram schools, Model Residential Schools (MRS), and Ekalavya schools were introduced mainly to improve educational access and literacy among tribal children. For many families, education is closely connected with hopes for employment, financial stability, and a better future. Because of this, hostel education is often viewed as necessary, particularly in places where children must travel long distances to attend school. At the same time, many researchers have pointed out that staying away from home for long periods can slowly affect children's relationship with their language, culture, and community life. Gupta and Padel (2018), in *Confronting a Pedagogy of Assimilation*, explain that residential schooling for tribal children often involves a gradual process of cultural adjustment.

The authors use the phrase “pedagogy of assimilation” to describe how schools encourage children to adapt to dominant social and cultural norms. According to the study, tribal children who spend most of their childhood inside institutional environments slowly become separated from the spaces where indigenous knowledge is usually learned through storytelling, observation, interaction with elders, forest activities, rituals, and everyday community life (Gupta & Padel, 2018). The study does not argue against education itself, but it shows that mainstream schooling systems are often organised around dominant cultural expectations while indigenous ways of learning receive little space within institutions.

Brayboy (2005), while discussing Indigenous educational experiences, argues that schooling institutions frequently operate through dominant cultural assumptions that may not fully recognize Indigenous worldviews and community-based learning systems. The study emphasizes that Indigenous students often navigate multiple cultural spaces simultaneously, negotiating between institutional expectations and community identities.

Such experiences are particularly relevant in residential educational settings where students spend substantial periods away from family and community environments. This perspective supports concerns raised within tribal education literature regarding the long-term influence of residential schooling on cultural continuity and identity formation.

Some of these concerns are clearly reflected in the present study. Several participants spoke about how hostel life gradually reduced their connection with settlement life and traditional practices. A few participants explained that after spending years in schools and hostels, they were less involved in community activities and had fewer opportunities to learn from elders. Others reflected that Malayalam slowly became more common in their daily communication than their mother tongue. These experiences suggest that educational mobility and cultural distance sometimes develop together within the lives of tribal students.

The Government of Kerala’s report *Analysis of Performance of Model Residential Schools in Kerala* (2019) also discusses the emotional and institutional difficulties experienced by tribal students inside residential schools. The report notes that many children entering hostels struggle with homesickness, loneliness, fear, language difficulties, and adjustment to institutional routines. Students are often unfamiliar with formal hostel discipline, structured schedules, and dominant-language communication during the early stages of schooling (Government of Kerala, 2019).

The report further points out that tribal languages, oral traditions, and cultural practices receive very little place within everyday hostel and classroom environments. As a result, children may slowly become emotionally distant from settlement life and community interaction.

These observations closely connect with the experiences shared by participants in the present study. Several participants remembered remaining silent during their early school years because they lacked confidence while speaking Malayalam. Some explained that they behaved differently inside schools and hostels compared to inside the settlement. Others described feeling emotionally more relaxed and comfortable within community spaces than inside educational institutions. Such experiences show that adjustment to mainstream education is not only academic but also emotional, social, and cultural.

Gupta and Padel (2018) further argue that assimilation inside educational institutions is often subtle rather than openly forced. Children are not directly told to reject their culture, but over time they learn which language, behaviour, and lifestyle are treated as more acceptable inside mainstream institutions. This gradual adjustment may influence the way students understand themselves and their relationship with their own community identity. Such concerns become especially important in tribal communities where learning traditionally happens through close intergenerational interaction and participation in everyday community life rather than through formal classroom teaching alone.

Existing literature also highlights how long periods of hostel education can reduce opportunities for children to learn oral traditions, ecological knowledge, rituals, songs, and forest practices from elders. Indigenous knowledge systems are often passed from one generation to another through observation, participation, and shared experience within the community. When children spend most of their time away from home, these learning processes naturally become weaker. Similar concerns appeared repeatedly in the present study, where participants expressed worry that younger generations are becoming less familiar with traditional knowledge, language, and settlement life compared to earlier generations.

At the same time, the literature does not completely reject residential education. Several studies acknowledge that hostel education has improved literacy and created educational opportunities for many tribal students who previously had limited access to schooling. Families often continue supporting education because they see it as important for survival and social mobility within wider society. Because of this, the experiences of tribal students cannot be understood only through ideas of cultural loss. Many students continuously negotiate between educational aspirations, institutional adjustment, and attachment to their language and cultural identity.

Similar tensions are visible in the present study, where participants appreciated the opportunities created through education while also expressing concern about weakening connection with settlement life and indigenous cultural practices.

The literature therefore shows that residential schooling among tribal communities is shaped by both opportunity and tension. While schools and hostels may improve educational access, they can also influence language use, emotional wellbeing, cultural continuity, and relationships with indigenous knowledge systems. Existing studies explain many institutional and structural aspects of residential schooling, but fewer studies have explored how tribal students themselves emotionally experience these changes in everyday life. The present study attempts to understand these lived experiences more closely by focusing on tribal students from Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur and their experiences of schooling, cultural change, and belonging.

2.2.3 Indigenous Knowledge, Cultural Continuity, and Ecological Learning

Indigenous knowledge has always been an important part of tribal community life. Among many tribal communities, knowledge is not learned mainly through textbooks or formal classroom teaching, but through observation, participation, storytelling, interaction with elders, and everyday engagement with the natural environment. Forests, rivers, plants, animals, rituals, songs, and oral traditions become part of children's learning from an early age. Because of this, several scholars argue that education among indigenous communities cannot be understood only through literacy or school participation, but must also include questions related to cultural continuity, ecological learning, and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Battiste (2002), while discussing Indigenous knowledge and education, argues that formal schooling systems often treat indigenous ways of knowing as less valuable than mainstream academic knowledge. According to Battiste, modern educational institutions are usually organised around dominant cultural frameworks, while indigenous knowledge systems remain marginalized or invisible inside classrooms. The study explains that indigenous knowledge is closely connected with memory, identity, land, language, spirituality, and collective experience rather than only written information. When children move away from these cultural learning environments for long periods, the relationship between education and community knowledge gradually becomes weaker (Battiste, 2002). This argument connects closely with the present study, where several participants reflected that younger generations are becoming less familiar with traditional practices, oral stories, forest knowledge, and indigenous ways of living compared to earlier generations.

Warren (1991) also highlights the importance of indigenous knowledge systems in understanding local environments and sustaining community life. According to Warren, indigenous communities develop knowledge over generations through direct interaction with their surroundings, and this knowledge often includes deep understanding related to forests, medicinal plants, seasonal changes, food practices, and ecological balance. The study argues that indigenous knowledge should not be viewed as “backward” or unscientific simply because it exists outside formal educational systems. Instead, it represents locally rooted ways of understanding the environment and sustaining collective life (Warren, 1991).

This becomes important in the context of the present study because participants repeatedly described how earlier generations learned through continuous interaction with forests and community life, while younger generations today spend more time within institutional educational spaces and digital environments.

Dei (2000) argues that Indigenous knowledge systems represent legitimate and valuable forms of knowledge that emerge from the lived experiences of local communities. According to the author, Indigenous knowledge is holistic in nature, integrating social relationships, environmental understanding, spirituality, and cultural values. Educational systems that fail to recognize these knowledge traditions may unintentionally contribute to cultural marginalization and the weakening of community-based learning processes. This perspective highlights the importance of preserving Indigenous knowledge not merely as cultural heritage but as an active and meaningful way of understanding the world.

Research on tribal education in Kerala has shown that residential schooling and prolonged engagement with mainstream educational institutions may reduce opportunities for children to participate in community-based learning environments. The Government of Kerala’s report *Analysis of Performance of Model Residential Schools in Kerala* (2019) notes that children staying away from home for long periods often experience reduced interaction with family members, elders, language practices, and community life. Such changes may affect opportunities for intergenerational learning through everyday participation and observation. Indigenous education literature similarly highlights the close relationship between language, cultural memory, ecological knowledge, and intergenerational learning. Battiste (2002) argues that Indigenous knowledge systems are sustained through language, collective memory, community participation, and relationships with land and community life.

UNESCO (2019) further emphasizes that Indigenous languages play a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, oral traditions, local knowledge systems, and ecological understanding. As language use weakens among younger generations, important forms of cultural memory, environmental knowledge, and community-based learning may also become vulnerable. These concerns closely resonate with the present study, where participants expressed anxiety regarding younger generations becoming increasingly disconnected from forests, traditional practices, oral traditions, and community-based learning environments.

UNESCO (2019) also emphasizes that indigenous knowledge and mother tongue learning are closely connected with children's cultural confidence and sense of belonging. According to UNESCO, educational systems become more meaningful when children are able to connect classroom learning with their own cultural realities and lived experiences. The report argues that culturally responsive education helps preserve community knowledge systems while also supporting children's emotional wellbeing and identity formation. In contrast, educational systems that completely ignore indigenous culture and language may contribute to feelings of alienation and cultural inferiority among indigenous students (UNESCO, 2019). These ideas strongly resonate with the present study, where participants repeatedly reflected on the emotional distance many children experience from settlement life after entering mainstream educational institutions.

Several scholars also point out that modernization and technological change are influencing the way younger generations interact with indigenous knowledge systems. Increased exposure to mobile phones, television, social media, formal schooling, and outside lifestyles has changed children's routines, interests, and patterns of social interaction in many tribal communities. While these changes have created new educational opportunities and access to information, they have also reduced the amount of time children spend learning through direct participation in community life and ecological environments. Similar transformations were visible in the present study, where participants compared earlier childhood experiences based on outdoor activities, collective interaction, and forest learning with the more technology-oriented lifestyles of younger generations today.

At the same time, existing literature does not present indigenous knowledge and modernization as complete opposites. Several studies argue that tribal communities continuously adapt to changing social realities while also attempting to preserve important aspects of their language, identity, and cultural practices. Education and modernization may create new opportunities for younger generations, but many indigenous communities also continue trying to maintain cultural continuity through oral traditions, language use, rituals, and community relationships.

Similar tensions are visible in the present study, where participants appreciated educational progress and employment opportunities while also expressing concern about weakening indigenous knowledge and cultural disconnection among younger generations.

Several scholars have noted that Indigenous knowledge systems depend heavily on intergenerational transmission. Knowledge related to ecological practices, oral histories, rituals, medicinal plants, and cultural values is traditionally passed from elders to younger generations through participation in everyday community life rather than through formal instruction. When opportunities for sustained interaction between generations become limited, the continuity of these knowledge systems may be affected. This concern has been widely discussed within Indigenous education literature and remains particularly relevant for communities experiencing rapid educational and social change.

The literature therefore shows that indigenous knowledge systems are deeply connected with language, ecology, identity, memory, and community life. Existing studies explain how formal schooling and modernization can gradually influence intergenerational learning and cultural continuity within tribal communities. However, fewer studies have explored how tribal students themselves emotionally experience these changes while negotiating between formal education, modernization, and attachment to indigenous identity. The present study attempts to contribute towards this gap by examining how tribal students in Nilambur understand cultural change, ecological disconnection, and the changing role of indigenous knowledge within their everyday lives.

2.2.4 Modernization, Identity Negotiation, and Cultural Change

Modernization has brought major social and cultural changes within many tribal communities across India. Increased access to formal education, roads, media, technology, mobile phones, government welfare programmes, and interaction with mainstream society has gradually changed everyday life in many indigenous settlements. These changes have created new opportunities for education, employment, healthcare, and social mobility. At the same time, several scholars point out that modernization also affects language use, cultural practices, intergenerational relationships, and community-based ways of learning. Because of this, many tribal communities today experience an ongoing negotiation between adapting to changing social realities and maintaining connection with their cultural identity.

Rath (2006), in his discussion on tribal development in India, explains that modernization among tribal communities is often uneven and complex. According to the author, development programmes and formal education frequently introduce tribal communities to new economic and social systems

without fully recognizing indigenous cultural realities. As communities become increasingly connected with mainstream institutions, traditional occupations, collective lifestyles, and cultural practices may slowly change over time (Rath, 2006). The study does not present modernization as entirely negative, but it argues that rapid social change can create uncertainty regarding identity, belonging, and cultural continuity among indigenous populations. Xaxa (2008) similarly argues that tribal communities in India are experiencing significant social transformation as a result of education, development interventions, market integration, and increasing interaction with wider society. According to the author, these changes have created new opportunities for mobility and participation while also raising important questions regarding cultural identity, community relationships, and the preservation of indigenous traditions. Xaxa emphasizes that tribal communities are not passive recipients of change but active participants who continuously negotiate between adaptation and cultural continuity. This perspective helps explain why modernization among tribal populations often involves both aspiration and cultural tension rather than a simple process of cultural loss. These concerns are relevant to the present study, where several participants reflected that younger generations today live very differently compared to elders because of education, outside exposure, and changing lifestyles.

Research on tribal education also shows that formal schooling often becomes one of the main spaces where cultural transitions begin. Schools introduce children to dominant languages, institutional routines, new aspirations, and wider social expectations from an early age. Over time, students may begin changing the way they communicate, interact, and imagine their future roles within society. Manojan (2018), in his study among Paniya tribes in Kerala, observed that many tribal students experience difficulties in relating to school environments because classroom content and educational practices often remain disconnected from their cultural experiences and indigenous knowledge systems. The study further found that students participated more actively when learning was connected to community life and local knowledge, highlighting the importance of cultural relevance within education. These observations suggest that educational institutions are not only spaces of learning but also important sites where tribal students negotiate between indigenous identity and mainstream social expectations.

Similar experiences appeared in the present study, where participants described behaving differently inside schools and outside community spaces. Some participants explained that they became more careful about language, appearance, and interaction while engaging with mainstream society.

Scholars of Indigenous education have observed that students frequently negotiate multiple identities while moving between educational institutions and community environments. Identity formation among Indigenous youth is often shaped by interactions with family, peers, schools, language practices, and broader social expectations. Rather than abandoning one identity for another, many students continuously balance educational aspirations with attachment to cultural traditions and community belonging. This process of identity negotiation becomes particularly visible when students encounter social environments that differ significantly from their cultural backgrounds.

Modernization has also influenced childhood experiences within tribal communities. Earlier studies on indigenous communities often describe childhood learning as closely connected with forests, rivers, agriculture, storytelling, collective activities, and interaction with elders. However, scholars examining modernization and social change among tribal communities argue that children today spend increasing amounts of time within institutional educational spaces and digital environments rather than within traditional learning settings (Xaxa, 2008; UNESCO, 2019). Increased use of mobile phones, television, and social media has also influenced communication patterns and lifestyle practices among younger generations. Similar observations were repeatedly visible in the present study, where participants compared earlier childhood experiences based on outdoor activities and community interaction with the more technology-oriented routines of children today.

Studies on Indigenous language preservation consistently emphasize the importance of everyday communication in maintaining linguistic and cultural continuity. UNESCO (2019) notes that Indigenous languages are closely connected with cultural identity, oral traditions, community memory, and intergenerational knowledge transmission. When children increasingly use dominant languages in schools, hostels, and public spaces, opportunities for regular mother tongue communication may gradually decline. Because many Indigenous languages are transmitted primarily through oral interaction rather than formal written systems, reduced language use among younger generations may also affect storytelling traditions, cultural practices, and community knowledge. These concerns closely resonate with the present study, where several participants reflected that children today often use Malayalam more frequently than their Indigenous language after entering formal educational institutions.

At the same time, several scholars argue that tribal communities should not be viewed only through ideas of cultural decline or victimization. Indigenous communities continuously adapt to changing social realities in different ways while also trying to preserve important aspects of their language, identity, and cultural life.

Battiste (2002) explains that indigenous identity is not static or frozen in the past; rather, communities constantly negotiate between continuity and change. Similar tensions appeared throughout the present study, where participants appreciated educational opportunities and outside exposure while simultaneously expressing concern regarding cultural disconnection and weakening traditional knowledge among younger generations.

UNESCO (2020) also emphasizes that culturally inclusive education becomes important during periods of rapid social change because educational institutions influence how children understand themselves, their language, and their community identity. According to UNESCO, schooling systems that ignore indigenous culture and mother tongue may unintentionally contribute to emotional alienation and weakening cultural confidence among indigenous students. These concerns connect closely with the experiences shared in the present study, where several participants reflected that younger generations often feel caught between mainstream expectations and attachment to settlement life and cultural identity.

Several researchers note that cultural change within Indigenous communities should not be understood as a complete replacement of traditional practices by modern influences. Instead, cultural transformation often involves selective adaptation, where communities adopt certain aspects of modernization while continuing to preserve elements of language, identity, knowledge systems, and collective memory. Such perspectives challenge simplistic assumptions that modernization inevitably leads to cultural disappearance and instead highlight the dynamic nature of Indigenous cultural life.

The literature therefore shows that modernization within tribal communities involves both opportunity and tension. Education, technology, and outside exposure may create new possibilities for younger generations, but they may also influence language use, cultural practices, intergenerational learning, and emotional belonging.

Existing studies discuss many structural and cultural aspects of modernization among indigenous communities, yet fewer studies have explored how tribal students themselves emotionally experience these ongoing changes within everyday life. The present study attempts to understand these lived experiences more closely by examining how tribal students in Nilambur negotiate between educational aspiration, modernization, community identity, and cultural continuity.

2.2.5 Tribal Identity, Belonging, and Emotional Disconnection

Several studies on tribal education and indigenous communities show that schooling influences not only literacy and employment opportunities but also the way students understand identity, belonging, and their relationship with community life. For many tribal children, entering mainstream educational institutions involves moving between two different social worlds — the cultural environment of the settlement and the institutional environment of schools and hostels. Because of this, researchers increasingly argue that tribal education must also be understood as an emotional and cultural experience rather than only an academic process.

Mohanty and Panda, while discussing language and education among indigenous communities in India, explain that many tribal students experience a gradual weakening of cultural confidence when schools fail to recognize their language and lived realities. The authors argue that children often learn very early which language, behaviour, and lifestyle are treated as more acceptable inside educational institutions. Over time, some students begin distancing themselves from their own language or cultural practices in order to adjust more comfortably within mainstream spaces. Such adjustment is not always openly forced, but happens slowly through everyday interaction inside classrooms, hostels, and public environments. Similar experiences appeared in the present study, where participants reflected that they often behaved differently inside schools compared to within the settlement. Some explained that they became more careful about language and communication while interacting outside their community.

Research on Indigenous education also shows that emotional belonging plays an important role in children's educational experiences. Battiste (2002) explains that indigenous identity is closely connected with language, memory, land, family relationships, and collective cultural experience. When educational systems ignore these aspects of children's lives, students may begin feeling emotionally disconnected from both school environments and their own community identity.

This concern strongly resonates with the present study, where several participants described feeling “in between” two worlds adjusting to mainstream educational systems while also feeling gradual distance from settlement life and traditional cultural practices.

Identity among Indigenous and tribal youth is increasingly understood as being shaped through continuous interaction between community experiences and wider social institutions. Identity is not a fixed characteristic but a dynamic process through which individuals negotiate belonging, cultural values, language, and social expectations.

For tribal students, educational institutions often become important spaces where these negotiations occur. As students move between community life and mainstream educational settings, they may continuously balance attachment to their cultural heritage with aspirations associated with education and social mobility. Such processes help explain why experiences of belonging and cultural identity often remain central to discussions of tribal education.

The Government of Kerala's report *Analysis of Performance of Model Residential Schools in Kerala* (2019) also points out that many tribal students experience emotional stress, insecurity, and loneliness inside residential schools. Students staying away from home for long periods often struggle with homesickness and adjustment difficulties, especially during the early years of hostel life. The report notes that institutional environments generally function through dominant social and linguistic norms, while tribal students receive limited emotional and cultural support inside these spaces (Government of Kerala, 2019). Similar concerns appeared repeatedly in the present study, where participants remembered silence, hesitation, fear of judgement, and emotional discomfort during their schooling experiences. Several participants also reflected that they felt emotionally safer and more relaxed within settlement environments than inside formal institutions.

Studies on Indigenous residential schooling in countries such as Canada and Australia have also documented experiences of emotional and cultural disconnection among Indigenous students. Battiste (2002) notes that educational institutions may unintentionally weaken connections between children and their cultural environments when Indigenous languages, histories, and community knowledge receive limited recognition within formal education. Although the historical context differs from India, researchers similarly observe that prolonged separation from family and community life can influence identity formation, emotional wellbeing, and cultural belonging among Indigenous learners.

At the same time, contemporary scholarship cautions against viewing tribal students only through ideas of cultural loss or victimization. Indigenous communities continuously adapt to changing social realities, and many tribal students actively negotiate between educational opportunities and cultural belonging in their everyday lives. Education may create confidence, mobility, and new aspirations, while emotional attachment to language, community, and homeland may continue alongside these changes. Similar tensions were visible throughout the present study, where participants appreciated the opportunities created through education but also expressed concern regarding weakening cultural connection among younger generations. Conversely, feelings of exclusion, cultural invisibility, or social distance may affect confidence, participation, and emotional adjustment.

These observations highlight the importance of understanding tribal education not only as an academic process but also as a deeply social and emotional experience.

Existing literature therefore shows that tribal students' educational experiences are deeply connected with questions of identity, belonging, emotional wellbeing, and cultural continuity. Mainstream educational systems may create opportunities for social mobility, but they may also influence how students understand themselves and their relationship with their community and language. While many studies discuss structural exclusion and educational inequality, fewer studies have closely explored the emotional experiences of tribal students themselves while negotiating between institutional education and indigenous belonging. The present study attempts to understand these lived experiences more deeply by focusing on tribal students from Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur and their experiences of identity, schooling, and cultural change.

2.2.6 Inclusive Education and the Need for Culturally Responsive Curriculum

Discussions on tribal education in recent years increasingly emphasize that educational access alone is not enough to ensure meaningful learning for indigenous children. Several scholars argue that schools become truly inclusive only when children are able to see their language, culture, environment, and lived experiences reflected within classroom learning. In many tribal communities, however, formal education still follows mainstream curriculum structures that give little space to indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, ecological learning, or local cultural realities. Because of this, many researchers have stressed the importance of culturally responsive and inclusive forms of education for tribal students.

Banks (2008), while discussing multicultural and inclusive education, explains that students learn more meaningfully when educational systems recognize their cultural background and lived realities. According to Banks, curriculum should not treat minority cultures as separate or secondary but should integrate diverse cultural experiences into the learning process itself. Educational inclusion therefore involves more than physical access to schools; it also requires emotional recognition, representation, and cultural respect within educational spaces (Banks, 2008). These ideas are relevant to the present study because several participants reflected that classroom learning often felt disconnected from their everyday life, settlement environment, and community experiences.

UNESCO (2019) also emphasizes that culturally responsive education is especially important for indigenous and tribal children. The report argues that children participate more confidently in learning when schools value their mother tongue, cultural identity, and local knowledge systems.

According to UNESCO, educational systems that completely depend on dominant languages and mainstream curriculum may unintentionally create feelings of exclusion and inferiority among indigenous students. In contrast, inclusive educational approaches help children maintain continuity between home and school environments while strengthening emotional wellbeing and classroom participation (UNESCO, 2019). Similar concerns appeared in the present study, where participants repeatedly described feeling more comfortable in spaces where their language and cultural background were understood and accepted.

The Tribal Education Methodology (TEM) project implemented in Wayanad provides an important example of efforts to develop culturally responsive educational practices for tribal communities. (Changing the Story, 2021). The project sought to create a sustainable curriculum by incorporating tribal heritage, oral traditions, performance practices, and community knowledge into educational activities. Through participatory approaches, the initiative emphasised the importance of connecting learning with the cultural experiences and lived realities of Adivasi youth in Wayanad. The project highlights the potential value of integrating indigenous knowledge and cultural resources within educational processes rather than treating them as separate from formal learning. This becomes particularly relevant to the present study because several participants reflected that schooling often felt disconnected from settlement life, community knowledge, and indigenous cultural experiences.

Research on multilingual education similarly shows that culturally inclusive learning environments help reduce emotional distance between tribal students and educational institutions. Mohanty and Panda argue that children learn more effectively when schools create continuity between home language and classroom language rather than forcing sudden linguistic adjustment. The authors explain that when tribal children are expected to abandon their mother tongue in favour of dominant languages alone, many students gradually become silent, hesitant, and emotionally disconnected from learning environments. Similar experiences were repeatedly described in the present study, particularly by participants who remembered fear and hesitation during their early school years because of Malayalam-medium instruction.

Existing literature also points out that tribal children are often represented within educational systems mainly through ideas of “backwardness,” poverty, or educational disadvantage rather than through their cultural strengths and knowledge systems. Smith (2012) argues that educational institutions have historically privileged dominant knowledge systems while giving limited recognition to Indigenous histories, languages, and world-views.

According to the author, meaningful educational inclusion requires creating space for Indigenous perspectives rather than expecting students to adapt entirely to dominant cultural frameworks. Battiste (2002) similarly argues that Indigenous education should move beyond assimilation-oriented models and instead create space for Indigenous worldviews, histories, ecological knowledge, and community learning practices within formal educational structures. This becomes important because educational systems influence not only literacy but also the way children understand the value of their own identity and culture. Similar concerns emerged in the present study, where participants expressed worry that younger generations are slowly becoming disconnected from language, oral traditions, and settlement-based learning practices.

Battiste (2002) argues that indigenous education should move beyond assimilation-oriented models and instead create space for indigenous worldviews, histories, ecological knowledge, and community learning practices within formal educational structures.

This becomes important because educational systems influence not only literacy but also the way children understand the value of their own identity and culture. Similar concerns emerged in the present study, where participants expressed worry that younger generations are slowly becoming disconnected from language, oral traditions, and settlement-based learning practices.

At the same time, existing literature also recognizes the practical challenges involved in implementing culturally inclusive education. Many schools lack teachers who understand tribal languages and community realities. Curriculum structures often remain highly standardized, leaving limited flexibility for local adaptation. In residential schools especially, institutional routines and examination-oriented learning systems may reduce opportunities for integrating indigenous cultural practices into everyday education. These challenges are visible in several studies on tribal education in Kerala, which note that although policies supporting inclusion exist, implementation within classrooms often remains limited. Similar concerns appeared indirectly in the present study, where participants reflected that schools rarely created space for their cultural experiences, language, or community knowledge within classroom learning.

The literature therefore shows that inclusive education for tribal communities involves more than improving enrolment or literacy rates. Meaningful inclusion requires recognition of language, cultural identity, indigenous knowledge, and emotional belonging within educational environments. Existing studies strongly support the importance of culturally responsive curriculum and multilingual learning for tribal students.

However, fewer studies have explored how tribal students themselves emotionally experience the absence of cultural representation within mainstream educational institutions. The present study attempts to understand these experiences more closely by focusing on how tribal students in Nilambur experience schooling, cultural visibility, and belonging within formal education systems.

2.2.7 Educational Displacement and Cultural Disconnection

Educational displacement has increasingly become an important concern in discussions on tribal education, especially in relation to indigenous communities experiencing rapid social and cultural change. Although formal schooling is often introduced as a pathway towards literacy, development, and social mobility, existing literature suggests that mainstream education can also create forms of emotional and cultural separation among tribal students. In many cases, children gradually move away from the language, knowledge systems, and community environments in which they were raised, while at the same time struggling to feel fully accepted within dominant social spaces.

Because of this, education may sometimes place tribal students in an uncertain position between institutional life and indigenous belonging.

Morarji (2014) discusses educational displacement as a process through which formal schooling may gradually distance students from their local communities, cultural environments, and traditional ways of learning. The author argues that education is often associated with modernization, mobility, and aspirations linked to dominant social groups, while local knowledge systems and community-based learning receive less recognition within formal institutions. As students spend increasing amounts of time within educational settings, they may experience a growing separation from traditional practices, community relationships, and indigenous ways of understanding the world. Morarji further suggests that schooling can contribute to what she describes as an “urbanization of the mind,” where students increasingly orient themselves towards values and lifestyles promoted through mainstream education. This perspective helps explain educational displacement as a process that involves not only physical movement to schools or hostels but also cultural, emotional, and identity-related forms of separation from community life.

Smith (2012) similarly argues that educational systems may contribute to cultural disconnection when Indigenous histories, languages, and knowledge systems receive limited recognition within formal schooling. According to the author, education becomes more meaningful when it strengthens students’ relationships with their cultural identity and community knowledge rather than encouraging assimilation into dominant cultural frameworks.

This perspective is particularly relevant to discussions of educational displacement because it highlights how schooling may influence not only academic development but also students' sense of belonging and cultural continuity.

This understanding of educational displacement is closely related to what Levinson and Holland (1996) describe as education functioning as a "contradictory resource." While education may create opportunities for literacy, employment, and social mobility, it can also generate new tensions in relation to identity, belonging, and cultural continuity. Similarly, Creed and Ching (1997) argue that schooling may contribute to an "urbanization of the mind," where students increasingly orient themselves towards values and aspirations associated with dominant social groups. These perspectives are particularly relevant to tribal communities because education may simultaneously provide opportunities for advancement while creating emotional and cultural distance from indigenous ways of life.

Such tensions are clearly reflected in the present study, where participants expressed appreciation for educational opportunities while also voicing concerns regarding language loss, weakening traditional knowledge, and reduced connection with settlement life.

Nambissan (1994), while discussing tribal education in India, explains that many indigenous children enter schools where the language, classroom interaction, and cultural expectations are unfamiliar from the beginning. The study argues that tribal students are often expected to adjust themselves completely to dominant educational environments without schools making equal effort to understand indigenous realities. As a result, children may gradually become silent, hesitant, and emotionally disconnected within classroom spaces. Nambissan further notes that tribal students are frequently viewed as academically weak even when the actual difficulty lies in the gap between home environment and school culture. These concerns connect closely with the present study, where several participants remembered feeling uncomfortable, silent, or insecure during their early educational experiences because of language barriers and unfamiliar institutional environments.

Mohanty and Panda also discuss how mainstream education can slowly distance tribal children from their own linguistic and cultural identity. The authors explain that when schools function only through dominant languages, many students begin reducing the use of their mother tongue in order to fit more comfortably within institutional spaces. Over time, this process may influence not only language use but also emotional attachment to community identity and indigenous cultural practices.

Mohanty and Panda describe this process as a form of “subtractive multilingualism,” where children are gradually pushed away from their home language instead of being encouraged to learn through it. Similar experiences appeared repeatedly in the present study, where participants reflected that Malayalam became more dominant in their daily communication after entering mainstream schools and hostels.

The Government of Kerala’s report *Analysis of Performance of Model Residential Schools in Kerala* (2019) also highlights how institutional schooling can create emotional distance between tribal children and settlement life. The report notes that many students experience homesickness, loneliness, emotional stress, and language difficulties after entering residential educational institutions. Students spending long periods away from home may slowly participate less in everyday cultural practices, oral traditions, and interaction with elders.

The report further points out that school environments generally function through dominant social norms while tribal languages and indigenous cultural realities receive very little space within daily institutional life (Government of Kerala, 2019).

These observations strongly reflect the concerns raised by participants in the present study, particularly regarding weakening connection with settlement life and reduced interaction with traditional learning environments.

Gupta and Padel (2018), in their discussion on residential schooling among tribal communities, explain that educational institutions often work through subtle processes of cultural assimilation. The authors argue that children are gradually encouraged to adapt to dominant behaviour, language, appearance, and institutional expectations in order to succeed academically and socially. According to the study, this adjustment process may slowly weaken children’s relationship with indigenous identity, especially when schools provide little recognition to tribal language, memory, and community knowledge. Gupta and Padel use the phrase “pedagogy of assimilation” to describe this process, where educational systems unintentionally reshape cultural identity while presenting themselves as spaces of development and inclusion (Gupta & Padel, 2018). This argument strongly resonates with the present study, where participants repeatedly described feeling emotionally caught between educational aspiration and attachment to their own cultural environment. Battiste (2002) and other scholars of Indigenous education have discussed similar concerns regarding cultural disconnection and identity formation among Indigenous learners. Research conducted in Indigenous communities in Canada and Australia suggests that prolonged separation from language, family, and

traditional learning systems may influence emotional wellbeing, belonging, and cultural continuity. Although the historical context differs from India, these discussions remain useful for understanding how educational institutions may unintentionally contribute to experiences of cultural and emotional displacement among Indigenous students

At the same time, the literature does not suggest that education should be rejected by tribal communities. Many studies acknowledge that formal education creates important opportunities related to literacy, employment, social mobility, and participation within wider society. Families often continue encouraging children to pursue education despite concerns regarding cultural change because schooling is viewed as necessary for future security and survival. Because of this, tribal students' experiences of education remain deeply complex. Students may value education and aspire for social mobility while simultaneously experiencing emotional distance from language, cultural practices, and community life.

Similar tensions were visible throughout the present study, where participants appreciated educational opportunities but also expressed concern regarding cultural disconnection and weakening indigenous identity among younger generations.

The literature therefore shows that educational displacement among tribal communities is not limited to physical movement from settlements to schools or hostels. It also involves emotional, linguistic, cultural, and social forms of separation that may gradually influence students' relationship with language, belonging, identity, and indigenous knowledge systems. Existing studies discuss many structural and institutional dimensions of this issue, but fewer studies have explored how tribal students themselves emotionally experience these changes within their everyday lives. The present study attempts to understand these lived experiences more closely by focusing on tribal students from Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur and their experiences of schooling, cultural transition, and belonging.

2.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation that guides a research study. It offers a systematic way of understanding, interpreting, and explaining the research problem by linking the study to established theoretical perspectives. Rather than merely describing a phenomenon, a theoretical framework helps the researcher interpret participants' experiences, organize the findings, and situate the study within existing scholarly knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative phenomenological research, the theoretical framework serves as an interpretive lens

through which the lived experiences of participants are understood. It supports the researcher in exploring how individuals make meaning of their experiences within particular social, cultural, and educational contexts. Instead of testing theories, phenomenological studies use theoretical perspectives to deepen the understanding and interpretation of participants' narratives. The present study explores the lived experiences of tribal students belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur with particular focus on educational displacement and cultural disconnection within mainstream educational settings. Since these experiences involve issues related to indigenous knowledge, language, identity, cultural continuity, educational inclusion, and belonging, the study is guided by two complementary theoretical perspectives: the Indigenous Knowledge Perspective and the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective. The Indigenous Knowledge Perspective provides an understanding of the relationship between education, indigenous language, ecological knowledge, cultural practices, and community life. It helps explain how mainstream educational systems may influence the preservation or weakening of indigenous knowledge and cultural identity. The Culturally Responsive Education Perspective emphasises the importance of educational systems that recognise and respect learners' cultural backgrounds, languages, values, and lived experiences. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how tribal students experience mainstream education and how education can become more inclusive and culturally responsive.

These theoretical perspectives guided the interpretation of participants' experiences throughout the study and assisted in understanding the relationship between mainstream schooling, indigenous identity, educational displacement, cultural disconnection, and participants' suggestions for creating a more inclusive educational environment

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE PERSPECTIVE

The Indigenous Knowledge Perspective recognises that indigenous communities possess unique systems of knowledge, values, languages, cultural practices, and ways of understanding the world that have been developed and transmitted across generations. This knowledge is deeply connected to the community's relationship with nature, local environment, social organisation, spirituality, and everyday life. Unlike formal knowledge acquired through mainstream educational institutions, indigenous knowledge is largely preserved through oral traditions, observation, participation, storytelling, and lived experiences within the community (Battiste, 2013). Scholars have emphasized that indigenous knowledge is not inferior to scientific or formal knowledge but represents a distinct and valuable way of knowing. Battiste (2013) argues that education should

recognise and respect indigenous knowledge systems rather than replacing them with dominant cultural perspectives. Similarly, Smith (2021) highlights that educational institutions have historically marginalised indigenous knowledge and contributed to the loss of indigenous languages, cultural practices, and identities. Recognising indigenous knowledge within education therefore becomes essential for promoting educational equity, cultural continuity, and social justice. Within the Indian context, tribal communities possess rich indigenous knowledge related to forest ecosystems, traditional livelihoods, medicinal plants, environmental conservation, language, and community life. This knowledge forms an integral part of their cultural identity and everyday existence. However, mainstream educational systems often prioritise standardised curricula, dominant languages, and formal academic knowledge while giving limited recognition to indigenous ways of learning and knowing. As a result, tribal students may experience difficulties in connecting their educational experiences with their cultural backgrounds, leading to feelings of cultural alienation and educational displacement.

In the present study, this perspective provides an important lens for understanding how mainstream education influences the lived experiences of tribal students belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur. It assists in exploring participants' experiences related to language use, cultural identity, indigenous knowledge, community relationships, and their sense of belonging within educational institutions. The perspective also helps interpret how educational practices may contribute to the preservation or weakening of indigenous cultural heritage. Thus, the Indigenous Knowledge Perspective enables the study to understand educational displacement not only as an educational challenge but also as a process that may affect cultural continuity, identity formation, and the transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations. By foregrounding indigenous voices and experiences, this perspective supports a more holistic understanding of inclusive and culturally respectful education.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE

The Culturally Responsive Education Perspective emphasises that effective education should recognise, respect, and build upon the cultural backgrounds, languages, values, and lived experiences of learners. It advocates for an educational environment where students' cultural identities are viewed as strengths rather than barriers to learning. This perspective challenges the assumption that all learners benefit equally from standardised educational practices and instead promotes teaching approaches that are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to cultural diversity (Gay, 2018). According to Gay (2018), culturally responsive education integrates students' cultural knowledge,

prior experiences, and ways of learning into the teaching and learning process. Such an approach enhances students' academic engagement, strengthens their sense of belonging, and creates meaningful learning experiences. Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that education should empower learners by promoting academic success while affirming their cultural identities and encouraging critical understanding of their social realities. Rather than expecting students to adapt completely to dominant cultural norms, culturally responsive education seeks to create learning environments where diverse cultures are respected and represented. For tribal students, culturally responsive education is particularly significant because their cultural experiences, indigenous languages, traditional knowledge, and community values often receive limited recognition within mainstream educational systems. When schools fail to acknowledge these cultural resources, students may experience feelings of exclusion, cultural disconnection, and reduced participation in the educational process. In contrast, educational practices that incorporate indigenous languages, local histories, community knowledge, and culturally relevant teaching strategies can foster a stronger sense of identity, belonging, and engagement with learning. In the context of the present study, the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective provides a framework for understanding how mainstream educational environments influence the experiences of tribal students from the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur. It helps interpret participants' narratives regarding classroom interactions, language use, relationships with teachers and peers, cultural representation within the curriculum, and their perceptions of inclusion or exclusion in school settings. The perspective also supports the exploration of participants' suggestions for developing educational practices that are more respectful of tribal cultures and responsive to their educational needs.

Thus, the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective complements the Indigenous Knowledge Perspective by focusing on how educational institutions can value cultural diversity and create inclusive learning environments. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of educational displacement and cultural disconnection while highlighting the importance of culturally inclusive educational practices that promote both academic participation and cultural continuity.

The present study integrates the Indigenous Knowledge Perspective and the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of tribal students in mainstream educational settings.

While each perspective offers a distinct lens, together they complement one another in explaining how educational experiences influence cultural identity, educational participation, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge.

The Indigenous Knowledge Perspective highlights the importance of recognizing indigenous knowledge systems, languages, cultural practices, and community-based ways of learning as valuable forms of knowledge. It provides a lens for understanding how mainstream education may affect the continuity of indigenous knowledge and cultural identity among tribal students. In contrast, the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective emphasizes the responsibility of educational institutions to acknowledge and incorporate students' cultural backgrounds, languages, and lived experiences into the teaching and learning process. This perspective focuses on creating inclusive educational environments where cultural diversity is respected and valued. The integration of these perspectives enables the study to interpret educational displacement and cultural disconnection not merely as educational challenges but as experiences shaped by the interaction between mainstream schooling and the cultural realities of tribal communities. Together, they help explain how differences in language, curriculum, teaching practices, and institutional culture influence students' sense of belonging, identity, and engagement with education. These perspectives also guided the interpretation of the participants' narratives throughout the study. They informed the analysis of themes related to indigenous language, cultural identity, educational experiences, relationships with teachers and peers, and participants' suggestions for improving educational inclusion. By using these complementary perspectives, the study seeks to present a holistic understanding of the educational experiences of tribal students while highlighting the importance of culturally responsive and socially inclusive educational practices.

2.4 RESEARCH GAP ANALYSIS

The review of literature indicates that considerable research has been conducted on tribal education in India and Kerala. Existing studies have examined issues such as educational access, school enrolment, language barriers, residential schooling, educational exclusion, indigenous knowledge, cultural assimilation, and inclusive education. Scholars including Nambissan (1994), Battiste (2002), Banks (2008), Morarji (2014), Gupta and Padel (2018), Xaxa (2008), and UNESCO (2019) have significantly contributed to understanding the relationship between education and tribal communities. Government reports have also documented challenges related to hostel education, school dropout, and educational inequality among tribal populations. Despite these contributions, several important gaps remain in the existing literature. First, much of the available research primarily focuses on

educational access, enrolment, policy implementation, literacy levels, and institutional challenges, while comparatively little attention has been given to the lived experiences of tribal students within mainstream educational settings. The emotional and personal meanings that students attach to schooling, hostel life, language, identity, and community relationships remain insufficiently explored.

Second, although previous studies discuss language barriers, cultural assimilation, and indigenous knowledge, these issues are often examined separately. Very few studies have attempted to understand how these experiences collectively contribute to educational displacement and cultural disconnection among tribal students.

Third, existing research has largely adopted quantitative, descriptive, or policy-oriented approaches. There is limited use of qualitative phenomenological research that explores how tribal students themselves interpret and experience mainstream education from their own perspectives.

Fourth, while several studies have been conducted among tribal communities in India and Kerala, very limited research specifically focuses on the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities of Nilambur. These communities, particularly the Cholanayikkan who are recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), possess distinct cultural, linguistic, and ecological characteristics that require context-specific exploration.

Fifth, previous studies have largely emphasized educational problems and institutional barriers but have given comparatively less attention to understanding how mainstream education influences indigenous identity, language use, emotional belonging, community participation, and intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge. Finally, although many scholars advocate for inclusive and culturally responsive education, relatively few studies have explored the recommendations of tribal students themselves regarding how education can become more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and responsive to their lived realities.

The present study seeks to address these gaps by adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of tribal students belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur. By examining educational displacement, cultural disconnection, indigenous identity, language, community belonging, and participants' suggestions for inclusive education, the study contributes context-specific knowledge to the growing body of literature on tribal education in Kerala.

CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains the research methodology adopted for conducting the present study titled *"Between Classroom and Forest: Educational Displacement and Cultural Disconnection among Tribal Students in Nilambur."* The chapter describes the research design, study area, participants, sampling method, sources of data, methods and tools of data collection, procedures of data analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study. Since the present research attempts to understand the lived experiences, emotional realities, and cultural experiences of tribal students within mainstream educational environments, a qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted for the study.

The methodology was designed to understand how tribal students experience mainstream schooling, language shift, cultural transition, identity negotiation, and emotional belonging within their everyday lives. The study particularly focuses on students belonging to Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur and examines how formal education influences their relationship with indigenous language, ecological knowledge, cultural identity, and community life. Since these experiences are deeply personal, emotional, and connected with everyday life situations, qualitative methods were considered more suitable for understanding the meanings and interpretations attached to these experiences by the participants themselves.

The chapter further explains the process through which data were collected from participants using in-depth interviews, observation, field notes, and audio recordings. The collected data were later transcribed, translated, organized, and analysed using thematic analysis in order to identify major themes and patterns emerging from participants' lived experiences. Ethical considerations such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity were also given importance throughout the research process. Thus, the present chapter provides the methodological framework that guided the study and helped in understanding educational displacement and cultural disconnection among tribal students in Nilambur.

3.2 TITLE OF THE STUDY

The title of the present study is ***“Between Classroom and Forest: Educational Displacement and Cultural Disconnection among Tribal Students in Nilambur.”***

The term “educational displacement” in the study refers to the emotional, linguistic, and cultural distancing that may emerge when tribal students adapt to mainstream educational environments that do not adequately recognise indigenous language, identity, and knowledge systems. Similarly, “cultural disconnection” refers to the gradual weakening of relationship with indigenous language, traditions, ecological practices, and community belonging experienced by some tribal students within changing educational and social realities. Thus, the title reflects the broader phenomenological concern of the study, which seeks to understand how mainstream schooling influences the lived experiences, identity, emotional belonging, and cultural continuity of tribal students in Nilambur.

3.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

3.3.1 General Research Question

How do tribal students in Kerala experience educational displacement and cultural disconnection, and what changes do they suggest for making education more inclusive and culturally sensitive?

3.3.2 Specific Research Questions

1. How do tribal students describe their schooling experiences, and how do these experiences influence their personal and cultural identity?
2. What challenges do tribal students experience in maintaining connections with their indigenous communities after prolonged engagement with mainstream education?
3. How does mainstream schooling affect the preservation of indigenous languages, ecological knowledge, and cultural practices among tribal students?
4. What changes do tribal students and their communities suggest for creating a more inclusive and culturally sensitive educational environment?

3.4 DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

Sl. No.	Terms	Theoretically definition	Operational definition
1	Tribal students	Tribal students refer to learners belonging to communities recognized as Scheduled Tribes under Article 342 of the Constitution of India. These communities possess distinct cultural traditions, languages, social institutions, and ways of life that differentiate them from the dominant population (Government of India, 2014; Xaxa, 2008).	In the present study, tribal students refer to individuals belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities of Nilambur who have experienced formal schooling and are able to reflect upon their educational experiences, cultural identity, community life, and experiences of educational displacement and cultural disconnection.
2	Educational Displacement	Educational displacement refers to the process through which formal schooling may gradually distance learners from their local communities, cultural environments, traditional knowledge systems, and indigenous ways of life (Morarji, 2014).	Educational displacement refers to participants' experiences of gradual separation from their indigenous language, traditional knowledge systems, community life, and settlement-based learning environments as a result of formal schooling and residential education.
3	Cultural Disconnection	Cultural disconnection refers to the gradual weakening of an individual's relationship with their language, cultural practices, community knowledge, traditions, and sense of belonging	In the present study, cultural disconnection refers to the experiences of Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan students who reported reduced use of their mother tongue, limited

		as a result of reduced engagement with their cultural environment and increasing exposure to dominant social and educational systems (Morarji, 2014).	participation in traditional practices, weaker interaction with elders, and feelings of distance from settlement life after prolonged engagement with mainstream educational institutions.
4	Indigenous knowledge	Indigenous knowledge refers to the local knowledge that is unique to a particular culture or society and is developed through generations of experience, observation, interaction with the environment, and adaptation to local conditions (Warren, 1991).	In the present study, indigenous knowledge refers to the traditional knowledge, practices, beliefs, ecological understanding, oral traditions, forest-based skills, and cultural learning possessed by Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities and transmitted through family, elders, and community participation.
5	Cultural identity	Cultural identity refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a particular cultural group, shaped through shared language, traditions, values, beliefs, history, and collective experiences (Smith, 2012).	In the present study, cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging and attachment that Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan students associate with their Indigenous language, cultural practices, traditional knowledge, settlement life, community relationships, and tribal heritage.

The present study uses certain important concepts related to tribal education, indigenous identity, language, and cultural transition. These concepts help in understanding the central themes and lived experiences explored in the research. The major concepts used in the study are educational displacement, cultural disconnection, indigenous knowledge, and inclusive education

3.5 PILOT STUDY

The pilot study was conducted during the initial phase of the research in order to understand the feasibility, relevance, and scope of the study among the tribal communities in Nilambur. The idea for the present study gradually emerged during the researcher's internship exposure and field interactions within tribal settlement areas. During this period, the researcher observed the educational experiences, cultural transition, language use, and changing lifestyle patterns among tribal students belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities.

Informal interactions with community members, students, and field workers helped the researcher identify issues related to language shift, hostel life, educational adjustment, and weakening participation in indigenous cultural practices among younger generations. These early observations and conversations helped in understanding the significance and relevance of the research topic within the community context.

The pilot phase also helped the researcher assess the accessibility of the settlements, willingness of participants to engage in conversations, and the practicality of conducting phenomenological interviews within the field setting. Through these initial interactions, the researcher gained better understanding regarding the nature of the study, participant experiences, and areas requiring deeper exploration during the main research process. The pilot study therefore helped in refining the focus of the research and strengthening the understanding of educational displacement and cultural disconnection among tribal students. Correct review this

3.6 RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study adopted a qualitative research approach in order to understand the experiences, perceptions, and emotional realities of tribal students within mainstream educational environments. Qualitative research focuses on understanding human experiences, meanings, feelings, interpretations, and social realities from the perspective of the participants themselves. Since the present study attempts to explore issues such as educational displacement, cultural disconnection, language shift, emotional belonging, identity negotiation, and changing relationships with indigenous life, a qualitative approach was considered more appropriate than quantitative methods. Quantitative methods may help in measuring educational indicators such as literacy, enrolment, attendance, or dropout rates, but they provide limited understanding regarding how tribal students emotionally experience mainstream schooling and cultural transition within their everyday lives.

The study specifically adopted a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that attempts to understand how individuals experience and interpret particular phenomena within their lived realities. The central focus of phenomenological research is not merely the external event itself, but the meanings, emotions, interpretations, and experiences attached to that phenomenon by individuals who have lived through it. In the context of the present study, phenomenology was considered suitable because the research aims to understand how tribal students experience mainstream schooling, hostel life, language change, cultural transition, emotional disconnection, and changing forms of belonging within their everyday lives.

The phenomenological approach helped the researcher to explore participants' experiences beyond institutional or policy-level discussions of tribal education. Rather than focusing only on educational statistics, literacy rates, or structural barriers, the study attempts to understand how students themselves describe their educational journeys, emotional struggles, cultural adjustments, identity concerns, and relationships with indigenous community life. The approach also made it possible to understand how participants interpret the effects of mainstream schooling on mother tongue use, ecological knowledge, oral traditions, social interaction, and intergenerational learning practices within their communities.

Another reason for selecting phenomenological design was the nature of the research problem itself. The issues explored in the present study are deeply connected with memory, emotion, identity, silence, belonging, and lived experience. Many participants reflected on feelings of hesitation, cultural distance, emotional insecurity, and difficulty in negotiating between mainstream educational spaces and indigenous community environments. Such experiences cannot be understood adequately through numerical data alone and require detailed narratives and personal reflections from participants themselves. Phenomenology therefore provided a suitable framework for understanding these subjective and lived dimensions of educational displacement and cultural disconnection.

The phenomenological design also allowed the researcher to give importance to participants' own voices, meanings, and interpretations throughout the study. In-depth interviews and informal interactions created opportunities for participants to describe their experiences in their own words and from their own perspectives. The researcher attempted to understand these experiences within the participants' social, cultural, and educational contexts rather than imposing predetermined assumptions or explanations. This approach helped in developing a deeper understanding of how

tribal students experience mainstream schooling within the changing realities of contemporary tribal life in Nilambur.

Thus, the qualitative phenomenological research design was considered appropriate for the present study because it enabled an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, emotional realities, and cultural transitions experienced by tribal students belonging to Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur.

3.7 STUDY AREA

The present study was conducted in Nilambur, located in the Malappuram district of Kerala. Nilambur is one of the major forest regions in the state and is known for its ecological richness, tribal settlements, and long-standing relationship between indigenous communities and forest environments. The region consists of forest areas, hilly landscapes, interior settlements, and environmentally sensitive zones where several tribal communities continue to reside. Because of its geographical and cultural characteristics, Nilambur provides an important setting for understanding the relationship between mainstream education, indigenous identity, language, and cultural transition among tribal communities.

The study particularly focused on areas such as Pattakarumbu and Mundakayam in Nilambur, where members of Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities reside. These communities were selected because the present study attempts to understand the lived experiences of tribal students belonging to these groups in relation to mainstream schooling and cultural change. The Cholanayikkans are recognized as one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Kerala and have historically maintained close relationships with forests and natural environments. Traditionally, learning within the community occurred through observation, storytelling, participation in everyday activities, interaction with elders, and direct engagement with forest life. Knowledge related to medicinal plants, food gathering, honey collection, forest navigation, wildlife behaviour, and survival practices formed an important part of everyday learning within the community.

Similarly, the Kattunayakan community also possesses strong indigenous cultural traditions and ecological knowledge systems closely connected with forests, oral traditions, and community-based learning practices. In both communities, language, cultural memory, and indigenous knowledge have traditionally been transmitted through everyday participation in community life rather than through formal institutional structures. However, increasing exposure to modernization, settlement

programmes, digital media, outside social environments, and formal education has gradually brought significant changes within these communities, particularly among younger generations.

Today, many children and youth from these communities attend Malayalam-medium schools, hostels, and mainstream educational institutions located outside their settlements. Due to geographical distance and limited educational facilities within interior settlement areas, several students depend on residential schooling and hostel-based education for continuing their studies. As a result, many students spend long periods away from their family and community environments during important stages of childhood and adolescence. While mainstream education has created opportunities related to literacy, awareness, educational mobility, and employment aspirations, it has also contributed to changes in language use, social interaction, childhood experiences, and participation in indigenous cultural practices among younger generations. Several participants and community members reflected that younger students today spend less time learning traditional practices, interacting closely with elders, and participating in forest-based activities that once formed an important part of everyday community life. Concerns were also expressed regarding the gradual weakening of mother tongue use among younger generations and the fear that important aspects of indigenous language and cultural knowledge may become increasingly vulnerable in the future if transmission across generations continues to decline.

The researcher selected Nilambur as the study area because the region reflects many of the broader social, cultural, and educational tensions associated with tribal education within contemporary indigenous life. The area provided opportunities to understand how tribal students negotiate between mainstream educational environments and indigenous cultural belonging within their everyday experiences. Since the present study attempts to understand educational displacement and cultural disconnection as lived realities among tribal students, Nilambur was considered an appropriate and relevant field area for the research.

3.8 SAMPLING STRATEGY

The present study adopted a purposive sampling strategy, which is widely used in qualitative phenomenological research. Purposive sampling involves the deliberate selection of participants who possess direct experience and knowledge relevant to the phenomenon being investigated. Since the objective of the study was to understand the lived experiences of educational displacement and cultural disconnection, participants were selected based on their ability to provide rich and meaningful information related to these experiences.

The participants belonged to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities of Nilambur and had experience of formal schooling in mainstream educational institutions.

Individuals who met the inclusion criteria and were willing to participate voluntarily were included in the study. The sampling strategy enabled the researcher to obtain detailed narratives that contributed to a deeper understanding of the relationship between education, cultural identity, language, indigenous knowledge, and community life.

3.8.1 INCLUSION CRITERIA

The study included participants who met the following criteria:

1. Participants belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan tribal communities in Nilambur.
1. Tribal students and youth within the age group of 15–30 years.
2. Participants who had experienced mainstream education, including school, hostel, college, or residential educational settings.
3. Participants who were currently studying, had completed schooling, discontinued education, or were pursuing higher education.
4. Participants who were willing to share their lived experiences, perspectives, and reflections related to education, identity, language, and cultural life.
5. A key informant with community-level understanding and experience related to tribal education and cultural transition was also included in the study.

3.8.2 EXCLUSION CRITERIA

The following individuals were excluded from the study:

1. Individuals belonging to communities outside the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan tribal communities.
2. Children below the age of 15 years who were unable to provide detailed experiential narratives relevant to the study.
3. Individuals who had no exposure to mainstream educational environments.
4. Community members who were unwilling or uncomfortable participating in the interview process.

5. Participants whose experiences were not directly connected to the focus of the study on education, cultural transition, and indigenous identity.

3.9 DATA COLLECTION

The present study used qualitative methods of data collection in order to understand the lived experiences, perceptions, emotional realities, and cultural experiences of tribal students within mainstream educational environments. Since the study focuses on educational displacement and cultural disconnection among tribal students, methods that allowed participants to describe their experiences in detail and in their own words were considered most appropriate. The researcher therefore used semi-structured interviews with the help of an interview guide, key informant interviews, observation, field notes, and audio recordings as the major methods of data collection. These methods helped the researcher understand not only the educational experiences of participants but also the emotional, linguistic, cultural, and social dimensions connected with their everyday lives.

3.9.1 SOURCES OF DATA

The present study utilized both primary and secondary sources of data to explore the lived experiences of tribal students regarding educational displacement and cultural disconnection in Nilambur, Kerala. The use of both sources enabled the researcher to obtain first-hand accounts from the participants while also developing a broader understanding of the social, educational, and cultural context of the study.

Primary Sources of Data

Primary data formed the main source of information for the study and were collected directly from the participants. As the study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach, emphasis was placed on understanding the participants lived experiences and the meanings they attached to their educational journeys.

The primary sources of data included:

- **In-depth interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with tribal students belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities of Nilambur. The interviews enabled the participants to share their experiences of mainstream education, cultural identity, educational

displacement, and the challenges they encountered in preserving their indigenous language, knowledge, and cultural practices. The interviews encouraged participants to express their experiences freely in their own words.

- **Key Informant Interview (KII):** A Key Informant Interview was conducted with an individual who possessed extensive knowledge of tribal education, community life, and the socio-cultural realities of the tribal communities. The information obtained from the key informant provided valuable contextual insights that complemented the experiences shared by the participants.

Secondary Sources of Data

Secondary data were collected to provide background information and contextual understanding relevant to the study. These sources assisted the researcher in understanding the broader context of tribal education and indigenous communities.

The secondary sources included:

- Books related to tribal studies, indigenous education, phenomenological research, and social work.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Government reports and policy documents related to tribal welfare and education.
- Publications of UNESCO and the Government of Kerala relevant to tribal communities and education.
- Previous dissertations, theses, and research studies related to tribal education, educational displacement, indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, and inclusive education.

3.9.2 TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION

The present study used different tools for collecting qualitative data from the participants. Since the study attempts to understand the lived experiences, emotional realities, and cultural experiences of tribal students within mainstream educational environments, tools that encouraged detailed interaction and open conversation were considered appropriate. The major tools used for data collection in the study included an interview guide, key informant interview guide, observation guide, audio recording, and field notes. These tools helped the researcher collect detailed information related

to educational experiences, language use, cultural transition, emotional belonging, and community life among the participants.

Interview Guide

An interview guide was used as the primary tool for conducting semi-structured interviews with participants. The interview guide included open-ended questions related to schooling experiences, hostel life, language use, educational challenges, emotional experiences, cultural identity, participation in traditional practices, and changing relationships with community life. The use of open-ended questions helped participants describe their experiences freely and in their own words without restricting their responses. The interview guide also allowed flexibility during interaction, enabling the researcher to ask additional questions based on participants' responses and experiences shared during the interview process.

The interview guide was prepared in a simple and understandable manner in order to create comfortable interaction with participants. Since the study focused on phenomenological experiences, the questions mainly encouraged participants to reflect on their feelings, memories, perceptions, and personal experiences connected with mainstream schooling and cultural transition. The tool helped the researcher collect detailed narratives regarding educational displacement and cultural disconnection within the everyday lives of tribal students.

Key Informant Interview Guide

A separate key informant interview guide was used for conducting the key informant interview included in the study. The tool focused on understanding broader community-level perspectives related to tribal education, language use, social change, hostel education, cultural transition, and the educational experiences of younger generations within the selected communities. The key informant interview guide also helped the researcher gather contextual understanding regarding the changing relationship between formal education and indigenous cultural practices within the community.

3.10 PRETEST

The pretest was conducted before the main data collection process in order to examine the clarity, relevance, and cultural appropriateness of the interview guide prepared for the study. As part of the pretest process, the researcher interacted with an elder from the tribal community who had academic

exposure and experience in the field of research at the PhD level. Being a member of the community himself, his insights and observations helped the researcher understand the cultural sensitivity, relevance, and practicality of the interview questions within the community context.

The interaction helped the researcher identify whether the questions were understandable, respectful, and capable of encouraging participants to comfortably share their lived experiences related to education, identity, language, hostel life, and cultural transition. Based on the suggestions and feedback received during the pretest, certain questions were modified, simplified, and rearranged to improve the natural flow of conversation and ensure better clarity during interviews.

The pretest also helped the researcher understand the emotional sensitivity of topics related to indigenous identity, language loss, educational experiences, and cultural disconnection among participants. In addition, it assisted in estimating the approximate duration of interviews and identifying practical difficulties that could emerge during field interactions. The insights gained during the pretest process contributed significantly to improving the effectiveness, cultural appropriateness, and overall quality of the interview process used for the main study.

3.11 DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected through semi-structured interviews, key informant interview, observation, field notes, and audio recordings were analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify, organise, and interpret recurring themes and patterns within qualitative data. Since the present study focuses on understanding the lived experiences, emotional realities, and cultural experiences of tribal students within mainstream educational environments, thematic analysis was considered appropriate for interpreting participants' narratives and experiences in a meaningful and detailed manner.

The interviews conducted during the fieldwork process were audio recorded with the verbal consent of participants. The recorded interviews were later transcribed carefully in order to preserve participants' responses as accurately as possible. As most of the interviews were conducted in Malayalam, the transcribed data were translated into English for the purpose of analysis and interpretation. Along with interview transcripts, field notes and observational reflections recorded during settlement visits were also organised systematically to provide additional contextual understanding during the analysis process.

After transcription and translation, the researcher repeatedly read the collected data to become familiar with participants' experiences, emotions, and narratives. Important statements, recurring experiences, emotional expressions, and meaningful observations related to schooling, language, hostel life, identity, cultural belonging, indigenous practices, and educational experiences were carefully identified from the collected data. Similar responses and experiences shared by participants were grouped together according to common meanings and patterns.

Through this process, major themes and subthemes related to educational displacement and cultural disconnection emerged from the data. Themes associated with language shift, emotional disconnection, identity negotiation, cultural transition, weakening participation in indigenous practices, hostel experiences, educational aspirations, and changing relationships with community life were identified and interpreted during analysis. The researcher attempted to understand these themes within the broader social, cultural, and educational realities of participants rather than interpreting them separately from their lived experiences.

Thematic analysis also helped the researcher organise large amounts of qualitative data into meaningful categories while maintaining attention to participants' own voices, interpretations, and lived realities. Throughout the analysis process, importance was given to understanding how participants themselves perceived the relationship between mainstream schooling, indigenous identity, language, belonging, and cultural continuity within their everyday lives. Thus, thematic analysis provided a suitable method for understanding the emotional, cultural, and phenomenological dimensions of educational displacement and cultural disconnection among tribal students in Nilambur.

3.12 ASSUMPTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

3.12.1 Assumptions of the Study

The present study was conducted based on the following assumptions:

1. It was assumed that the participants had experienced mainstream education in ways that enabled them to meaningfully reflect on their educational journeys and cultural experiences.
2. It was assumed that participants would honestly and willingly share their lived experiences, perceptions, emotions, and reflections during the in-depth interviews.

3. It was assumed that participants' experiences within mainstream educational environments shaped different aspects of their educational and cultural lives, which they would be able to describe during the study.
4. It was assumed that experiences of educational displacement and cultural disconnection varied among participants according to their personal, social, cultural, and educational contexts.
5. It was assumed that the lived experiences shared by participants would provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon of educational displacement and cultural disconnection among tribal students.
6. It was assumed that a qualitative phenomenological approach was appropriate for exploring the meanings that tribal students attached to their experiences of educational displacement and cultural disconnection.
7. It was assumed that the Indigenous Knowledge Perspective and the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective provided appropriate conceptual lenses for understanding participants' experiences of language, identity, indigenous knowledge, and educational inclusion.
8. It was assumed that the narratives shared by participants, together with insights obtained from key informants, would contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

3.12.2 Limitations of the Study

The present study faced certain limitations during the fieldwork and data collection process. These limitations were mainly connected with the practical realities of conducting research within tribal settlements and understanding personal experiences related to education, language, identity, and community life.

6. Difficulty in Accessing Settlement Areas

One of the major challenges faced during the study was the difficulty in accessing certain tribal settlements, especially Cholanayikkan settlement areas located in the interior forest regions of Nilambur. Transportation facilities to some areas were limited, and reaching a few settlements required additional travel time and physical effort. In certain places, the researcher had to spend more time travelling than expected during the fieldwork process. These geographical conditions affected the pace and convenience of data collection to some extent.

7. Initial Hesitation Among Participants

Although the researcher had previous exposure to the community through a one-month internship experience, some participants initially showed hesitation while sharing personal experiences related to schooling, hostel life, language, identity, and relationships within the community. Since many of the discussions involved emotional and personal experiences, a few participants required time to become comfortable during the interview process. Through regular interaction, informal conversations, and respectful communication, participants gradually became more open in sharing their experiences and opinions.

8. Limited Time and Field Conditions

The study was conducted within limited time and field conditions. After identifying the research topic during the internship period, the researcher later revisited the selected areas specifically for data collection. Due to time limitations and practical difficulties during field visits, the study focused mainly on collecting detailed narratives from a limited number of participants rather than conducting large-scale data collection across different locations.

9. Difficulties in Translation and Interpretation

Certain limitations were experienced during the transcription and translation process. Although Malayalam was used during interviews and participants were generally comfortable communicating in the language, some emotional expressions, indigenous terms, and culturally rooted meanings were difficult to translate completely into English. Certain experiences shared by participants carried deeper meanings connected with their social and cultural background, which were not always easy to express accurately in translated form. The researcher therefore attempted to preserve the original meaning and context of participants' responses as carefully as possible during analysis and interpretation.

10. Limited Sample Size and Context-Specific Findings

Since the study followed a qualitative phenomenological approach, only a limited number of participants were included in the research. The study focused more on understanding participants' experiences in depth rather than producing generalized findings. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all tribal communities or educational experiences across Kerala. Instead, the study attempts to provide an in-depth understanding of educational displacement and cultural disconnection among selected participants belonging to Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur.

Despite these limitations, the study was able to gather meaningful insights regarding the educational experiences, emotional struggles, cultural changes, and changing relationship with indigenous identity among tribal students in Nilambur. The field experiences helped the researcher understand

the complex relationship between education, language, identity, and community life among the participants despite the practical challenges faced during the study.

3.12.3 Scope of the Study

The present study focuses on educational displacement and cultural disconnection among tribal students belonging to Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur, Malappuram district of Kerala. The geographical scope of the study is limited to selected tribal settlement areas in Nilambur, particularly Pattakarumbu and Mundakayam, where the researcher conducted fieldwork and data collection. The study attempts to understand the relationship between mainstream schooling, indigenous identity, language, emotional belonging, and cultural transition within the everyday lives of tribal students from these communities.

The study primarily focuses on the lived experiences of tribal students who have been exposed to mainstream educational systems such as Malayalam-medium schools, hostel education, and formal institutional learning environments. Participants included school-going students, college students, and students who had discontinued their education. The research also included one key informant in order to gain broader contextual understanding regarding educational experiences and social changes within the community. The scope of the study therefore includes experiences related to schooling, language use, hostel life, identity negotiation, emotional adjustment, participation in indigenous practices, and changing relationships with community life among younger generations.

The thematic scope of the study is limited to understanding educational displacement and cultural disconnection as lived and phenomenological experiences within tribal communities. The research particularly explores issues such as language shift, weakening mother tongue use, cultural transition, emotional belonging, indigenous knowledge, and the impact of mainstream educational environments on identity and community participation. The study also examines how tribal students negotiate between educational mobility and attachment to indigenous cultural life within contemporary social realities.

Methodologically, the study is limited to a qualitative phenomenological approach. The research does not attempt to measure educational achievement, literacy rates, academic performance, or statistical trends related to tribal education. Instead, the study focuses on subjective experiences, emotional realities, and personal narratives shared by participants during interviews and field interaction. Since the study follows a qualitative approach with a limited number of participants, the findings cannot be generalized to all tribal communities or educational experiences across Kerala. Rather, the study

attempts to provide contextual and in-depth understanding regarding the experiences of the selected participants within their specific social, cultural, and educational environment.

The present study also does not attempt to evaluate government policies or institutional programmes in a comprehensive manner. Although educational policies, hostel systems, and welfare structures form part of the broader background of the research, the central focus of the study remains on participants' lived experiences and interpretations related to mainstream schooling and cultural transition. Thus, the scope of the study is confined to understanding educational displacement and cultural disconnection among tribal students in Nilambur within the context of phenomenological and qualitative inquiry.

3.13 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Ethical principles were carefully followed throughout the research process to ensure the dignity, rights, privacy, and well-being of all participants. Since the study explored personal experiences related to education, language, identity, culture, and community life among tribal students belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities, particular attention was given to conducting the research in a respectful, culturally sensitive, and ethically responsible manner.

Informed Consent

Prior to data collection, the purpose, objectives, and nature of the study were clearly explained to all participants in a language they could understand. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before conducting the interviews. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in the study was based entirely on the willingness of the participants. No individual was forced, pressured, or influenced to participate in the research. The researcher respected the decisions of individuals who chose not to participate or who wished to discontinue the interview.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The confidentiality of all participants was strictly maintained throughout the study. Personal identities and identifying information were not disclosed in the dissertation. Pseudonyms or participant codes were used during transcription, analysis, and reporting to protect participants' privacy.

Privacy and Respect for Participants

Interviews were conducted in settings that ensured participants' comfort and privacy as far as possible. Participants were treated with dignity and respect throughout the research process. The researcher maintained sensitivity while discussing personal experiences related to education, language, identity, and cultural life.

Cultural Sensitivity

Since the study involved Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), the researcher remained respectful of the participants' customs, traditions, language, and cultural practices throughout the fieldwork. Care was taken to avoid questions or behaviour that could offend, stereotype, or misrepresent the community. The researcher also respected local norms and community protocols while conducting the study.

Avoidance of Harm

The researcher ensured that participation in the study did not cause physical, psychological, social, or emotional harm to the participants. Interviews were conducted in a supportive and non-judgmental manner. Participants were not compelled to discuss experiences that made them uncomfortable.

Accuracy and Integrity of Data

The researcher ensured that participants' responses were recorded, transcribed, translated, analysed, and interpreted honestly and accurately without fabrication, falsification, or misrepresentation. Care was taken to preserve the original meaning and context of participants' narratives during translation and analysis.

CHAPTER IV: CASE DESCRIPTION

CASE 1

Geographically, it is a settlement of the Kattunayika community. It is a quiet place with many trees. At the entrance itself, we can see a hall that is used for community meetings.

While walking inside, researcher saw a few people going to work. One of the community members, Mrs.S, was waiting for me along with her husband, who was there to help me with the data collection. As we walked toward their house, researcher noticed many old and destroyed buildings, which were part of their old settlement. They had already informed the children that researche would be coming to talk with them, as they usually do not speak openly with strangers.

The house where the researcher sat had cattle, which they use for their livelihood. They also grow areca (adakka) palm and sell it, which shows that the community practices agriculture. They also keep chickens and dogs as domestic animals.

The researcher first conducted an interview with a 17-year-old boy, P1. Researcher introduced herself, explained the concept of my study, mentioned where researcher is studying and came from, and tried to build rapport. He was accompanied by three of his friends who also came to give interviews.

He is currently studying in Palakkad and has been studying there for the past six years. When the researcher asked about his first experience at school, he initially said that it was many years back and that he did not remember. smiled and asked him to try to recall. He then said that it felt scary to go to school at first because he did not know anyone. At that time, they did not go to MRS; instead, they attended a school near the settlement (Bethal School).

They faced difficulties because there were students from outside communities, and they did not speak their community language. They did not easily start conversations or make friends. Most of their close friends were from their own community. The classes were conducted in Malayalam. He mentioned that the teacher was very supportive and helped them in everything. However, he felt that going to school was not always a good experience because of the social challenges. Some children from other communities showed hesitation in interacting with them, as their parents had told them not to talk to children from other religions or communities.

When the researcher asked about cultural pride, he said that when he was younger, he did not know much about it. But now, he has no hesitation in saying that he belongs to this community. He said that he was good at sports in school and even secured first place, which was a proud moment for him.

After the 5th standard, they started going to MRS and staying in the hostel. That was when significant changes began. Even though the hostel was meant for community students, there were students from different states. Language differences created difficulties.

Life became limited to the hostel routine and timetable. When he was at home earlier, he felt free. He only had to walk one kilometre to reach Bethal School, so he never missed school and did not feel much change. But after moving to the hostel, he began to miss home deeply. Before coming home for vacations, he feels very excited.

His parents had already thought that their children might struggle if they did not know Malayalam and might face discrimination. So, they started teaching them Malayalam at home, even though they themselves speak the community language. He said that after going to school, they began missing the river, their homeland, and the freedom they had there. In their settlement, they could walk freely, talk with peers, and participate in cultural activities. However, while staying in MRS, they are unable to attend community functions due to travel constraints, which reduces their cultural involvement.

He mentioned that he knows some traditional stories and folklore told by his parents, but he cannot fully learn from his grandparents because he is not fluent in the community language.

He understands it, but he cannot speak it well. This disconnection happened because their parents emphasised Malayalam for educational purposes. He expressed a strong desire to learn the language but said that there is no one to teach him properly. He also mentioned feeling lonely in the hostel, as every day follows the same routine.

He said that the use of their community language has reduced significantly. Even among friends, only a few can speak it fluently. Parents speak the community language among themselves and with elders, but when speaking to children, they mostly use Malayalam. He acknowledged that there is a clear language shift.

Even if he tries to learn, only elders speak it fluently, and there is no time to learn because they stay in the hostel and return to the community only during long vacations. During vacations, they prefer spending time with friends rather than learning the language.

He also mentioned that he loves to learn traditional musical instruments, but again, he does not have time. His food habits have changed after exposure to the outside world, and he has started liking fast food. From a young age, he does not remember playing any specific traditional games; they simply roamed around and played freely.

While when asked him to compare life in the forest and life in the hostel, he replied without hesitation that he always prefers the forest. However, he also wants to study and work. He does not want to leave his homeland permanently because, according to him, there is no other place like it full of freedom, happiness, and friends.

As a suggestion, he said that they should use their community language more often. For him, there is no one to communicate with in that language. Learning from elders is the only option. He expressed concern that even his generation does not know the language well enough to teach the younger ones. He strongly believes that preservation of the language is important.

Both the community and outsiders should recognise its value. Teaching the language from a young age is essential, and parents must understand the importance of preserving it.

CASE 2

P2, a 16-year-old boy from Patakarimbu settlement. Patakarimbu is one of the settlements where a visible and drastic cultural shift can be observed. The older generation speaks the community language fluently, yet it is rarely used with children. Parents consciously avoid teaching the language to their children because they believe Malayalam proficiency will help them succeed outside the settlement and prevent discrimination or difficulty in formal education.

P2 is currently studying at Munnar MRS (Model Residential School). Like other students, he stays in the hostel and follows a fixed daily routine. Compared to the previous participant, P3 appeared more confident and expressive. He seemed mature for his age and demonstrated a deeper understanding of the issues being discussed.

When speaking about his early schooling experience, P2 shared that he initially struggled with hesitation. Whenever a teacher asked him a question, he would remain silent, even if he knew the answer. This happened many times. Eventually, he realised that staying silent would not help him. He told me, "If we want anything, we should open our mouth for ourselves. Only we will be there to speak for us."

With encouragement from teachers, he gradually developed confidence. He began answering questions, speaking in front of others, and participating more actively in class. He reflected that many people in his community have a tendency to withdraw or step back when questioned. He admitted that he too had this habit earlier, but it changed with motivation and exposure to school.

P2 expressed a strong desire to secure a job in the future, particularly in the IT field. However, when the researcher asked whether that would mean leaving his settlement permanently, he immediately responded that he does not want to leave his homeland. He envisions a life where he can go to work and return home afterward.

He repeatedly emphasised his emotional attachment to Patakarimbu. He said that whenever he gets holidays, he "runs back home" to meet his friends and enjoy the freedom of the place. Even if he has work or responsibilities, he tends to forget them because he becomes immersed in the joy of being home.

According to him, no other place gives him the same sense of freedom and happiness. Life in the hostel follows a strict timetable waking up early, eating at fixed times, attending study hours, and

maintaining routine discipline. Although facilities like study spaces and tuition support are available, P3 does not enjoy the rigidity of this structured life.

At home, in contrast, there is freedom. He can wake up at his own time and engage in activities he prefers. This contrast between regulated institutional life and the flexible rhythm of community life is significant in shaping his experiences.

Phone usage is restricted in the hostel, which limits communication and leisure. However, he does not complain about hostel discipline overall and mentions that teachers are supportive and additional tuition is available if needed.

A major concern that emerged during the interview was the declining use of the community language. In MRS, everyone speaks Malayalam. Even among students from the same community, their native language is rarely used. P3 stated that many people believe speaking the community language will not help them “grow” or progress in life.

Within his own home, he observes that his parents speak the community language with elders but use Malayalam when speaking to him and younger children.

This clearly reflects an intergenerational language shift. The language is being confined to elder-to-elder communication, while children are socialised primarily in Malayalam.

Even in the settlement, the use of the traditional language has significantly decreased. There is a shared perception that prioritising Malayalam ensures better integration into mainstream society.

P2 suggested that cultural knowledge should be integrated into formal education. He proposed that schools could include books or library sections dedicated to each community’s culture. According to him, there should be syllabus content that includes:

- Traditional food practices
- Indigenous plants and their uses
- Cultural techniques and survival knowledge
- Historical and cultural narratives

He believes such inclusion would allow both community members and outsiders to learn about the culture meaningfully.

He also emphasised the importance of adapting to the digital era. Since children are already exposed to mobile phones and games, he suggested using digital platforms and game-based learning methods to teach language and culture. However, he stressed that preservation efforts should begin at the

community level. The first step, according to him, must be a change in parental mindset. Parents need to recognise the importance of their language and culture before expecting children to value it.

P2 also highlighted changes in food habits. In the hostel, students eat what is provided, which differs from their traditional diet.

At home, they consume rice, fibre-rich foods, and leafy vegetables, which are healthier and more aligned with traditional practices. However, exposure to outside environments has normalised packet foods and processed items, marking another dimension of cultural transition.

In the hostel, P2 maintains friendships both within and outside his community. Although there is at least one other student from his community, their traditional language is not actively used even between them. He has adapted socially and does not focus on how others perceive him. Instead, he concentrates on his responsibilities and personal growth.

CASE 3

P3, a 24-year-old woman from the Kattunayaka community in Patakarimbu. She completed her BA in Sociology through distance education. Unlike the previous participants, P3 has moved further in education and is currently working with Keystone. Her reflections were detailed, reflective, and deeply rooted in lived experience.

When the researcher asked her about her first experiences in school, she immediately spoke about humiliation and discrimination. She explained that she faced caste-based discrimination because she belonged to the Kattunayaka community. In her school, there were Muslim, Christian, and other students from different religious and caste backgrounds. She felt that some of them treated her differently once they came to know her community identity.

She recalled that whenever teachers asked if any students were eligible for grants or tribal benefits, she would try to avoid attention. She hesitated to reveal that she was from the Kattunayaka community. She explained that when people hear the word “Kattunayaka,” they often associate it with “forest people” and make fun of it. When teachers identified students belonging to Scheduled Tribes, other students would come to know her identity, which made her uncomfortable.

Because of this, she limited her interactions to students from her own community. She mostly spoke only with them and avoided forming wider friendships. This continued until she joined ITI for further studies. There, around 80% of the students were from the same community. In that environment, she did not face discrimination. For the first time, she began to openly say that she belonged to the Kattunayaka community without hesitation.

She described her school life as simple going to school and returning home. She did not actively participate in extracurricular activities, though she remembers participating in an Oppana group song once. Unlike many others, she did not study in an MRS hostel. She completed her education by attending school daily from home.

When the researcher asked her about language, she shared something significant. Even though she grew up within the community, she does not know her mother tongue fluently. At home, her parents speak the community language among themselves, but they did not teach it to her.

During the interview, her mother was present, and P3 directly asked her, “Why didn’t you teach me our mother tongue?” Her mother replied that they intentionally taught their children Malayalam so that they would not face difficulties when interacting with other children outside the settlement.

She explained that students who study in MRS hostels may know a few words of the community language because they occasionally meet peers from the same community. However, hostel life creates a disconnection. Students return to the settlement only for short vacations sometimes just ten days. During that limited time, it takes a few days to reconnect and “gel” with people in the community. Just as they begin to reconnect, the vacation ends, and they return to the hostel again.

She observed that earlier, when important cultural events or deaths occurred in the community, children studying outside were brought back to participate. Now, many parents do not consider it important to bring their children back for such occasions. They question the need, saying, “Why bring the children all the way for this?” According to her, people fail to realise that without participation, cultural practices slowly erode.

She reflected that in the past, community members themselves conducted rituals and traditional practices. Now, outsiders are often brought in to perform customs such as chenda drumming and other ceremonial acts. Meanwhile, most people are working in government or other formal sectors and living what she described as a “normal” modern life.

Financial stability and employment have become priorities. Agriculture, forest-based livelihoods, and traditional practices are no longer central to daily life.

She believes that this shift is strongly influenced by modern education and hostel life. According to her, hostel life is very difficult and emotionally distancing. Younger generations are not giving importance to elders, and elders themselves do not fully recognise or understand the depth of change that is happening.

Through her work with Keystone, she became interested in researching older cultural practices, plants, and indigenous knowledge. When she began asking elders about traditional practices and plant uses, they started recalling forgotten knowledge. Some would say, “Yes, we used to use this, but now we don’t.”

Gradually, elders themselves became more curious and engaged. If they found a plant or remembered something new, they would inform her. In a way, her research revived their memory, and they began actively recalling and sharing their knowledge.

However, she pointed out that generally, no one is spending time learning or teaching these traditional practices. Elders are not sharing knowledge as they once did, and younger generations are not asking. Oral transmission of indigenous knowledge, which was once common, is declining.

She mentioned that the community has a hall called Padamuri. For the past two and a half years, it has been functioning as a tuition centre with a tutor from the same community. The tutor supports school-going children, helps dropouts, assists with homework, and teaches languages and subjects.

P3 suggested that this community hall could be used as a space for cultural preservation. She proposed conducting weekly or daily sessions perhaps one or two hours dedicated to teaching the community language, indigenous knowledge, traditional practices, and cultural history.

Since the hall is located within the settlement and meant for community members, it could become a safe space for cultural revival. Students studying in MRS could also participate during vacations.

She raised a serious concern about MRS students. According to her, many of them neither gain proper community knowledge nor fully grasp what they are taught in school. Some struggle to write properly in Malayalam or other languages, and at the same time, they are not fluent in their own Kattunayaka language. This creates a “blank space,” where they are disconnected from both the modern educational system and their traditional roots.

She also spoke about the “scribe” system used in examinations. Students with low academic performance sometimes register under the scribe category, where another person writes the exam for them. Many tribal students enrol under this category and pass examinations, but she questions the cost of such passing. According to her, they may pass exams without truly learning the subject matter.

She compared past and present teaching systems in MRS. Earlier, teachers were strict but caring. They focused on the children’s future and ensured proper learning. Students respected teachers.

Now, she feels that many teachers work primarily for salary, and the emotional commitment has reduced. The discipline and mutual respect that once existed between teachers and students has weakened.

She also pointed out a striking contradiction: many parents from the older generation, who studied less formally, know how to write in Malayalam. However, some children who have completed 10th standard in modern school’s struggle to write properly in Malayalam. There are several such cases in the community.

Her narrative reflects not just personal experience, but also a deep concern for the direction in which the community is moving caught between modern education and cultural disconnection.

P3 also spoke about the changes in food habits within the community. According to her, in earlier times the community depended largely on forest-based and fibre-rich foods. Their diet included leafy vegetables, tapioca, fruits, and other edible items collected from the forest.

These foods were naturally available and formed an important part of their traditional lifestyle. However, she explained that this pattern has changed significantly. Today, rice has become the primary food consumed by most families. She believes that this dietary shift has negatively affected the health of the community. In the past, people lived longer and healthier lives, whereas now the life expectancy has reduced, with many people living only up to around sixty or seventy years.

She also reflected on the growing presence of digital technology within the community. Mobile phones and internet access have become very common, especially among the younger generation. Instead of viewing this as entirely negative, she suggested that technology could be used in constructive ways to support cultural learning. For example, she proposed the development of mobile applications or digital games that could help children learn about indigenous knowledge systems. These applications could include interactive activities such as puzzles, matching exercises, and storytelling formats that teach children about traditional plants, edible leaves, fruits, and forest resources.

She explained that such digital tools could also introduce children to traditional practices such as honey collection, the different types of honeybees found in the forest, and the seasonal changes that indicate when certain fruits or plants are ready for harvesting. Through interactive and game-based learning methods, children would not only gain knowledge but also retain it more effectively.

According to her, teaching through storytelling and narrative formats helps knowledge stay longer in memory, especially for younger children.

While discussing spaces for cultural preservation, she emphasised that Model Residential Schools (MRS) could play a significant role.

Many tribal children spend several years of their lives in these residential schools, making them important institutions in shaping their identity and knowledge. Ideally, she believes that MRS should be places where students not only receive modern education but also develop a deeper understanding of their cultural roots. However, she expressed concern that the current reality is quite different. Many students neither fully understand the academic subjects taught in school nor gain sufficient knowledge about their own culture, language, beliefs, or traditions.

She further explained that the Kattunayaka community, like many other tribal communities, traditionally exhibits a quiet and calm nature. Community members tend to be soft-spoken and generally avoid confrontation or loud forms of expression. Because of this cultural trait, she believes that teaching methods should be adapted accordingly. Teachers working with tribal students should communicate patiently and calmly, avoiding harsh tones, shouting, or statements that might humiliate students. According to her, repeating explanations patiently and allowing students to ask questions without fear or embarrassment is essential for effective learning.

She also reflected on how the behaviour of the community often mirrors the behaviour they receive from others. If someone approaches them with anger or aggression, they may respond similarly. However, their natural disposition is generally peaceful and respectful. Therefore, respectful and patient engagement from teachers and outsiders can help build better communication and learning environments.

As part of her suggestions, P3 emphasised that children should be taught about the nature and culture of their community from an early age. At the same time, teachers who work with tribal students should also receive orientation or training to understand the cultural characteristics of the communities they teach.

She suggested that students who show interest in cultural knowledge and community traditions could be encouraged to take up teaching roles in the future within MRS institutions.

According to her, such initiatives should not be limited only to the Kattunayaka or Cholanaika communities of Nilambur but should extend to all tribal communities. Each tribal group has its own unique cultural practices, ecological knowledge, and ways of living. Preserving this uniqueness is important not only for the community itself but also for society as a whole.

She believes that there will eventually come a time when people will want to reconnect with their roots and understand where they come from. When that moment arrives, preserved knowledge, cultural documentation, and trained individuals who can teach these traditions will become extremely valuable.

She suggested that learning should not remain confined to textbooks. Practical exposure can play a crucial role in transmitting indigenous knowledge. For instance, children could be taken to the forest where elders can explain the uses of specific plants and leaves, demonstrate which leaves are edible,

and narrate stories associated with certain natural resources. Such experiential learning, combined with storytelling, games, and quizzes, could make the process both engaging and memorable.

She also proposed that certain traditional skills and activities could be incorporated into school curricula. These could include activities such as swimming, honey collection techniques, and other nature-based livelihood skills. Such training could be particularly valuable for students who may not continue with formal education. Even if they leave the modern education system, these skills could help them sustain themselves through traditional livelihoods or alternative skill-based work.

Through these reflections, P3 highlighted the importance of creating a balanced educational system one that provides access to modern knowledge while also safeguarding the cultural and ecological wisdom that has sustained the community for generations.

CASE 4

P4, an 18-year-old female from the Kattunayaka community. She is currently pursuing a BA in Economics. When I reached her house along with P1, who accompanied me during the visit, the researcher first observed the surroundings before entering.

Outside the house, where the researcher saw two women making brooms using dried coconut leaves. A small child was playing nearby with the materials they were using. The environment reflected the everyday livelihood practices within the settlement. As we approached the house, a dog followed us. P1 mentioned that the dog usually stays around the house and helps scare away monkeys when they come near.

Before meeting P4, where the researcher briefly spoke with her mother and explained the purpose of my visit and why the researcher had come to speak with her daughter. Her mother then called P4 from inside the house. When P4 came out, she was using her mobile phone and appeared to be watching Instagram reels.

At first, she did not seem very interested in talking. Where the researcher introduced herself, explained that researcher had come from her college for research purposes, and briefly mentioned the topic of my study. She responded casually and seemed unsure about why the researcher wanted to speak with her. Initially, she appeared hesitant and not very engaged in the conversation. Where the researcher felt that she might not be interested in participating. However, after a few moments she asked what kind of questions is going to ask. She seemed to expect that the questions would be complex or strictly related to education.

When started asking simple questions about her experiences and daily life, she gradually began to speak more openly. During the conversation, however, I noticed that she continued to use her phone occasionally while responding.

This observation itself indicated how strongly mobile phones and digital media have become integrated into the everyday lives of the younger generation within the community.

During the discussion, P4 expressed a very different perspective compared to some of the other participants. She stated that she does not personally feel there is a strong need to preserve the community language. According to her, the language has not played a significant role in helping her in her education or life outside the settlement.

Interestingly, she can speak the community language well and occasionally uses it with a few friends who are also from the same community in the hostel. However, she does not consider it particularly

useful beyond that context. She explained that people from outside the community” such as researchers or outsiders often emphasise the importance of preserving the language. In her view, this concern appears to come more from outsiders than from people within the community itself.

She explained that many young people feel that preserving the language is not particularly important for their own lives. According to her, when people from the community speak their language outside the settlement, it sometimes attracts unwanted attention or mockery. She mentioned that there are moments of identity discomfort when others make fun of the language or associate it with being “from the forest.” Because of this, some young people prefer not to emphasise their linguistic identity.

P4 suggested that the idea of preserving the language often comes from people outside the community who see it as something valuable or unique. However, for some members of the younger generation living within the community, the language does not necessarily feel essential to their daily life or future aspirations.

She also mentioned that in her college life she has not experienced much discrimination. However, during her earlier school years she initially faced some difficulties in adjusting. Over time, those experiences reduced as she became more accustomed to interacting with others.

When asked whether she would consider teaching the community language to the next generation in the future, she clearly stated that she would not. Her reasoning was that the language did not provide significant advantages or opportunities in her own life. Because of that, she does not see a reason to pass it on to younger children.

She also pointed out that many parents today consciously avoid using the community language with their children. They believe that focusing on Malayalam or other mainstream languages will help their children succeed and prevent them from facing discrimination when they interact with the outside world. From this conversation, it became evident that within the community there are different perspectives regarding language preservation.

While some individuals strongly feel the need to protect and revive the language, others, particularly among the younger generation, do not always see its relevance in their present lives. For some, the language is associated with identity struggles and social stigma rather than cultural pride.

P4’s narrative revealed how modernisation, education, and exposure to the outside world influence the attitudes of young people toward their own linguistic and cultural heritage. Her perspective highlights an important internal tension within the community. While some individuals advocate preservation, others view adaptation to mainstream society as more important for their future.

CASE 5

P5, a 20-year-old young man from the Kattunayaka community. He studied in a Model Residential School (MRS) and completed his higher secondary education (12th standard). At present, he is working in Coimbatore after discontinuing his college education.

When asked about his school life, P5 explained that the initial experience of schooling was difficult and somewhat frightening, which was similar to what other participants had mentioned. He recalled that in the beginning he felt uncomfortable and hesitant about going to school. However, as time passed, he gradually adjusted to the school environment and developed friendships with other students.

After completing his 12th standard, he received admission to pursue a B. Com degree. However, he did not continue with the course. When asked about this decision, he explained that he was not interested in the subject and found it difficult to understand the lessons being taught in college. Another important reason was the absence of students from his community. He described himself as a quiet and reserved person who finds it difficult to initiate conversations with others. As he explained, "I don't talk first with others. If someone asks something, only then I reply."

Because of this personality and the unfamiliar environment, he felt isolated in the college setting. He believed that he would not be able to make friends easily, which made him uncomfortable continuing his studies. Eventually, he decided to discontinue college and start working instead.

P5 is currently working in Coimbatore, where he earns a regular income. He mentioned that there are a few people from his community working at the same place.

This has helped him form a small group of friends, which gives him a sense of belonging and comfort. He explained that having familiar people around him makes his work life easier and more enjoyable.

When the researcher met him, he had temporarily returned to the settlement. He explained that he had taken leave from work to spend time with his friends who had come back to the community during the Christmas vacation. He said that these visits are important for him because they allow him to reconnect with his friends and the place where he grew up.

Although he is satisfied with his work life, he admitted that he still misses the community. At the same time, he values the financial independence that employment provides. He explained that earning money allows him to manage his personal needs and expenses. As he stated, "Now I earn money, so I can manage my own things like phone recharge and other expenses."

He also spoke about changes in food habits after moving to the city. In the settlement, the food they consumed was mostly traditional and home-based. However, in Coimbatore he often eats food from outside, including hotel food and packaged items. This change in diet reflects the broader lifestyle shift that many young people experience when they move away from the community for work.

When discussing language, P5 explained that he still uses the community language when interacting with other Kattunayaka people working with him. However, he expressed concern about the future of the language. According to him, the language is slowly disappearing. As he stated, "In the future there may not be many people speaking our language. It may slowly disappear."

He emphasised that the responsibility for preserving the language and cultural knowledge lies with the current generation.

According to him, the elders still possess the knowledge about the community's traditions, language, and way of life. However, if this knowledge is not passed on now, it may be lost permanently. He reflected on this issue by saying, "Our parents know the language and culture. If they don't teach us now, we cannot teach the next generation."

He also pointed out that many young people today do not have sufficient knowledge about their own culture and traditions. Because of this, they may not be able to pass on that knowledge in the future. This creates a significant gap between the older generation who hold the knowledge and the younger generation who are gradually losing connection with it.

P5 expressed that preserving cultural knowledge is important for people who may want to reconnect with their roots in the future. Even if individuals move outside the community for work or education, having knowledge about their cultural identity helps them understand where they come from.

Finally, he mentioned that if any programs or initiatives are organised to preserve the community's language, culture, or indigenous knowledge, he would be willing to participate and support such efforts. As he stated, "If there are programs to protect our language or culture, I will help."

His reflections highlight the complex situation faced by many young people in the community balancing economic opportunities outside the settlement while also recognising the gradual loss of cultural knowledge within their own society.

CASE 6

The next interview was with P6, a 22-year-old woman from the community who is currently working at Keystone. She studied fashion designing after completing her schooling.

When speaking about her school life, P6 explained that she studied in Bethal School, which was located outside the settlement. Many students there were from different religions and communities. P6 comes from a community that traditionally lives deep inside the forest, and she said that from a very young age she experienced discrimination because of this identity.

While recalling her childhood experiences, she spoke with visible distress and sadness. She mentioned that she faced discrimination both because of her community background and because of her skin colour. As she explained, "From a very young age I was mocked for my colour and also because I am from this community."

She described that even during her later studies in fashion designing, similar experiences continued. Some people mocked her for being born in a forest community. She also mentioned that certain teachers treated students differently. For example, when fees were delayed due to financial difficulties, they did not show understanding or provide flexibility. This created emotional stress for her.

Unlike many other participants, P6 did not study in a Model Residential School. Instead, she attended a nearby school and returned home every day. She explained that the learning environment inside the community was very different from the one outside. Earlier, when there was only one teacher in the community school, that teacher understood their behaviour and nature well and taught them accordingly. However, in outside schools each subject was taught by a different teacher, each with a different attitude and teaching style. This made her feel uncomfortable and hesitant to ask questions.

She also struggled with language in the beginning. She had difficulty understanding Malayalam, English, and Hindi. She recalled one incident where she was humiliated in front of the whole classroom for not knowing the language properly. That experience stayed strongly in her memory. However, she also mentioned that after the 10th standard the classroom environment gradually became more supportive. Her classmates and teachers started helping her more, and the situation improved as she grew older.

When she moved to study fashion designing and stayed in a hostel, she again faced discrimination. Some students mocked her background and financial condition. Because of this, she experienced emotional stress and often missed her home and community.

At one point in her life, these experiences made her decide that she would stop speaking her own community language. She explained that even her father strongly discouraged her from speaking it. According to her, **"If my father heard me speaking our language, he would shout and tell me not to speak it."** He believed that speaking the community language would not help her progress in the outside world. Because of this belief, many parents in the community encourage their children to focus on Malayalam instead of their mother tongue.

P6 also reflected on the broader changes happening in the community. According to her, modern education has significantly changed the traditional skills that once existed. Many practices that were common earlier are now disappearing. For example, earlier children knew how to swim in rivers, climb trees, run through the forest, or identify medicinal leaves that could cure wounds. Today, many young people do not know these skills anymore.

She also mentioned traditional cultural games such as Vattakali, which used to be played during festivals. Now these games are rarely seen in the community. When she thinks about this loss, she feels a sense of shame because even she cannot clearly explain these traditions despite belonging to the community. When she asks elders about them, they sometimes question why she wants to learn these things.

She also observed that fewer people are willing to speak about their own language, customs, and traditions. However, she noted that some practices are slowly returning, such as puberty ceremonies and certain rituals that are now being celebrated again.

P6 suggested that important cultural practices and rituals should be documented. She believes that photographs, written records, and books could help preserve knowledge about traditional songs, instruments, and customs. She mentioned that community songs such as naadan paattu and the traditional instruments used in those performances should be recorded and documented.

She explained that her perspective changed significantly after she started working with Keystone.

Through her work, she began learning more about the importance of her own culture, language, and identity. She said that it was only after joining the organisation that she realised the value of preserving these traditions.

However, she also feels that much knowledge has already been lost. According to her, only a small number of elders now possess detailed knowledge about the traditions and language. She believes that modern education has unintentionally created a mindset where people feel that their traditional knowledge is not important in the modern world.

She also noted that the younger generation now spends much of their time on mobile phones, television, or digital media.

According to her, this has reduced the time children spend in nature or learning about the forest. As she explained, “Children now spend their vacations on phones and television instead of going to the forest.”

She suggested that the use of Malayalam within the community should be reduced to some extent and that more importance should be given to speaking the community’s mother tongue. According to her, children should be encouraged to use their own language more often so that it continues to live among the younger generation. One way to do this, she said, is by taking children into the forest and teaching them directly through experience allowing them to see, touch, and understand the plants, trees, and other elements of the forest environment. Learning through such practical exposure would help them connect more deeply with their community’s ecological knowledge. She also suggested that storybooks or textbooks could be prepared in the community’s own language so that children can learn about their culture and environment while studying.

Spaces such as the **Padanamuri** (community learning center) could also be used for this purpose. Teachers from within the community could conduct sessions there, teaching children their language, traditions, and cultural practices. She mentioned that if such opportunities arise, she would personally be willing to teach the younger generation in her own language.

However, she also pointed out that such efforts may face resistance from within the community itself. Some people may not accept the idea of learning or speaking their own language. In some cases, even members of the community reject these efforts, saying that they do not want to learn the language anymore.

According to her, the influence of the outside world plays a major role in this mindset. When people see outsiders, they often begin to imitate their lifestyles wanting to build similar houses, dress like them, and live in the same way.

Because of modern education and exposure to outside society, many people begin to believe that only those ways of living are valuable and important.

As a result, only a few people in the community are willing to openly speak about their language, customs, and traditions, while others completely reject these ideas. She also emphasised that the claim that discrimination no longer exists is not entirely true. According to her, discrimination still continues, even if some people deny it. She also mentioned that many young people are told that after completing the 10th standard they will easily get a job because they belong to a tribal category. She believes this is misleading, as reality is often very different and many still struggle to find employment.

Despite these challenges, she believes that organisation such as Keystone and other community initiatives can play an important role in preserving the community's culture and knowledge. These initiatives can create spaces where children and young people can reconnect with their roots and learn about their language, traditions, and ecological knowledge. She suggested that gatherings, meet-ups, or camps could be organised where children can spend time learning about their community, understanding their cultural practices, and reconnecting with their identity.

CASE 7

P7 36-year-old woman from the Kattunayakan community who originally lived in Mancheri, a settlement located deep inside the forest. The place is surrounded by dense forest and rich wildlife. While travelling to the settlement, animals such as elephants and deer can often be seen on the way. The path leading to the houses is narrow and surrounded by thick vegetation.

The houses in the settlement are traditionally built. Her house, like many others there, is made of mud and bamboo. The floor is paved very neatly with mud, almost similar to tiled flooring in a modern house. The roof is made using leaves and natural materials. Even though the houses are simple, they are very clean and well maintained.

P7 studied from 1st to 7th standard in Mancheri itself. After that she moved to a Model Residential School (MRS) in Wayanad, where she studied from 8th to 10th standard. Later she completed Plus One and Plus Two in another school outside the settlement. At present she is pursuing TTC (Teacher Training Course) and staying in a hostel while continuing her studies.

During her early school life, she faced a problem related to identity and name. When she was first enrolled in school, her parents registered her name as “P7.” Over time, other students started mocking this name. They would laugh and say that it sounded like a nickname or even like a pet’s name. Because of this she felt embarrassed and uncomfortable during those days. She said that when people mocked her name, she felt ashamed to even introduce herself.

Despite such experiences, she always loved her life in Mancheri. She spoke about the forest life with affection and nostalgia. The forest was not just a place where she lived; it was part of her identity and everyday life. However, life in the forest also had its difficulties. Sometimes there were conflicts with wildlife, especially elephants. She remembered nights when people in the settlement could not sleep because elephants were moving near the houses. Those moments created fear, but they were also part of the reality of living close to the forest.

When she moved to the residential school in Wayanad, she experienced another kind of struggle. Until the 12th standard she was the only student from Mancheri studying there. Because of this she often felt lonely. The language used in her home and community was the Kattunayakan language, while the school environment used Malayalam and other languages. Because of this language difference she found it difficult to communicate with other students.

During those days she described herself as a very silent and shy person. Even when she did not understand something in class, she was afraid to ask questions. She explained that many children from forest communities experience the same situation. They remain quiet because they are afraid to speak in a language, they are not confident in.

Later in her life, things began to change when she started working as an Anganwadi teacher and began pursuing her TTC training.

Through this experience she realised that she could no longer remain silent. Teaching children required her to communicate openly. Slowly she began to speak more confidently. She explained that when she looks at children who sit quietly in class without understanding the lesson, she remembers her own childhood and understands their feelings.

Today she says her life has changed in many ways. Earlier she was afraid to speak, but now she travels alone to continue her studies and achieve her dream. She explained that this change did not happen suddenly; it came slowly through education, experience, and encouragement from her family.

She also mentioned that she has a very supportive family who always encouraged her to continue her education. Their support helped her overcome many difficulties.

Another major turning point in her life happened when her husband was attacked by an elephant. Because of that incident, the family had to move away from Mancheri and stay outside the forest area for safety reasons. Even though they moved out, she deeply misses the life inside the forest. She says that the freedom and natural beauty of forest life cannot be replaced.

She also spoke about the difference between community life and hostel life, especially in relation to food habits. In the settlement people usually eat simple food and do not follow strict meal schedules. They eat when they feel hungry. In the morning they might drink black tea or eat kappa (tapioca). In the afternoon they may eat rice with leafy vegetable curry or sometimes tapioca again.

However, when she moved to the hostel everything was very different. There were fixed meal timings breakfast, lunch, evening snacks, and dinner. The routine was very structured. For her, the biggest difference was not just the food but the lifestyle itself.

When asked what she missed the most, she said it was the freedom of life in Mancheri. In the forest they could swim in the river, climb trees, and move freely in nature.

She remembered a childhood experience where they sometimes made a bed using sand near the riverbank and slept there. The coolness of the sand and the sound of the flowing river created a peaceful atmosphere. She described those memories with a sense of happiness and longing.

Now, as a future teacher, she believes that language plays an important role in learning. Many children from the community do not understand Malayalam at the beginning. She said that she can easily identify this by looking at their faces when they appear confused during lessons.

Because of this, she sometimes teaches using the Kattunayakan language first, especially when explaining the names of animals, birds, plants, and other natural elements. After that she slowly introduces the Malayalam words. According to her, this method helps children understand better. Without learning the basics in their own language, children may struggle to understand the lessons.

She also spoke about traditional knowledge and cultural practices. She said that she does not know many traditional songs or cultural rituals in detail, although her parents and elders know them well. Many of these traditions are slowly disappearing because they are no longer practiced regularly.

At the same time, she also mentioned that some people in the community are trying to reconnect with their traditions. Certain rituals are still being practiced. One example she mentioned is **Uru Utsavam**, a traditional community festival. According to the belief, once the festival begins it must continue for seven consecutive years.

However, children who study in hostels often miss such cultural events because they are away from the community. As a result, they grow up without direct exposure to these traditions.

She also said that the Kattunayakan community has many traditional skills such as building tree houses, constructing houses, and understanding the forest environment. Earlier parents used to pass these skills on to their children. Today many young people are not learning these skills anymore.

During the interview an interesting moment occurred. She received a phone call from her husband, and immediately she started speaking in the Kattunayakan language. Her husband also spoke in the same language. This showed that the language is still alive within family communication.

She also shared that she has two daughters, and she consciously teaches them the community language at home. She believes that encouraging children to speak their mother tongue within the family is one of the most important ways to keep the language alive.

Even though she now studies, travels, and lives partly outside the forest, she says that her heart still belongs to the life she lived in Mancheri. At the same time, she worries that if people stop using their

language and stop sharing their traditional knowledge, slowly the culture, indigenous knowledge, and language of the community may disappear.

CASE 8

P8 is a 22-year-old student currently studying BA History. The interview with her took place in the colony where she lives, located in Bhoomikuthu. The journey to reach her home itself was an experience that revealed much about the environment and living conditions of the community.

Initially, the researcher went to the older colony, expecting to meet someone for the interview, but there was no one there at that time. A person from the colony noticed our presence and came forward to help. He accompanied us and guided us to another settlement where people from the community were staying. The researcher was also accompanied by a resource person during this visit.

We walked for quite a long distance to reach the place. It was a very sunny and dry day, and the heat was strong. The path we walked through passed by a large rubber plantation, which was private land. The area looked dry compared to the forested surroundings in other parts of the region.

After walking further, we finally reached Bhoomikuthu, where P8 lives. The road leading into the colony was paved with cement. As we entered the area, the first things I noticed were goats and hens moving around the houses, which seemed to be part of the everyday livelihood of the families living there.

On the way to P8's house, there was a small open temple-like structure located between the houses along the pathway. It was not a closed building but rather an open place of worship. It looked like a small sacred space used by the community for spiritual or ritual purposes. This small structure stood quietly among the houses, indicating the presence of shared cultural or religious practices within the settlement.

As we entered the colony, several women were standing outside their houses. They looked at us with curiosity, as if they were not used to seeing outsiders coming into their settlement.

The person who accompanied us explained to them that we had come for research purposes. Gradually, people became comfortable with our presence.

That was when the researcher first met P8. Her house was simple and modest. The building looked unfinished. It was not fully painted, and the interior had very little furniture. The door of the house was open, and inside there were only a few basic items. It seemed like a house that was still in the process of being completed.

At that moment, P8's mother was outside cutting dry wood and small sticks. These pieces of wood were being prepared for use in the kitchen as cooking fuel.

The scene reflected the everyday domestic activities in the settlement. After some time, her mother also came near us and joined the conversation.

When the researcher first approached P8, she appeared very shy and hesitant. She was soft-spoken and spoke very gently. At first, she seemed unsure about participating in the interview and said softly:

"Chechi, enikk ariyilla entha parayende..."

(Sister, I don't know what to say.)

Where the researcher reassured her that there were no right or wrong answers and that I was simply interested in hearing her experiences and opinions. After a few moments she slowly became comfortable and agreed to talk.

Meanwhile, her mother also shared some of her own experiences. She explained that she too had gone to school during her younger days. However, she could not complete her education until the 10th standard. She mentioned that during her school years she had stayed in a hostel for some time. While talking about her childhood and school days, she seemed happy and nostalgic. Even though she could not continue her education, she spoke about those memories with a sense of warmth and was eager to share them.

When asked P8 about her first experience of going to school, she said that she felt very scared in the beginning. She remembered worrying about how other children would see her.

She explained that she often had thoughts like:

"They may think I am from the forest. Will they include me in games or class?"

Because of this fear she found it difficult to make friends at first. She was unsure whether other students would accept her. These thoughts created hesitation and anxiety in her early school life.

However, as time passed, things slowly changed. By the time she reached 10th standard, she had made a few friends from the locality. The classes in school were conducted in Malayalam, and gradually she became comfortable communicating in that language.

She mentioned that during those days students were generally afraid of teachers, but the teachers themselves were not harsh or aggressive. They were supportive in their own way.

At the same time, she still remembers one particular incident from her childhood that affected her deeply. When she was studying in 5th standard, a Muslim girl who was sitting next to her in class

told the teacher that she wanted to sit somewhere else. The reason was simply that P8 belonged to a tribal community. That moment made her feel hurt and different from the other students.

Even though this happened, P8 also emphasised that not everyone behaved in that way. She believes that sometimes discrimination happens because people learn such attitudes from their families or surroundings.

Later she moved to Kozhikode for further studies. However, she said that she did not feel comfortable living there. She did not like the lifestyle or environment there very much. Because of this discomfort, she eventually returned back to her home.

She said that her family has always been supportive of her education. They always encouraged her to continue studying. There was never a situation where her family told her to stop her education.

When the conversation moved to community knowledge and indigenous knowledge, P8 admitted that she does not know much about it. She said that even though she lives in a forest area, she never really paid attention to learning these things earlier.

She said that when she thinks about it now, she sometimes feels ashamed and sad that she does not know more about her own roots. According to her, parents also did not share many of these things with children, and children themselves were not curious enough to ask.

She explained that some types of knowledge, especially medicinal knowledge from the forest, are not shared openly with everyone. Such knowledge is usually shared only with trusted people, because it can be misused if it spreads outside the community. Because of this, and because younger generations are not actively learning it, she feels that indigenous knowledge is slowly disappearing.

She also observed that nowadays many people in the community are working as daily wage labourers outside the forest. Earlier people relied more on forest resources such as honey collection or medicinal plants. Now people depend on outside work, and they do not have time to pass on traditional knowledge to younger generations.

P8 also spoke about changes in food habits. Earlier people used to collect food such as tapioca, seeds, and leafy vegetables from the forest.

These foods were part of their everyday diet. But now many people buy food from outside markets. She believes that this change has affected the health of the community.

She believes that culture, rituals, and traditional knowledge should be shared with the younger generation, and younger people should also take initiative to learn from elders.

During her graduation, she had to do a project related to forest knowledge. That was when she started asking her parents about traditional practices. Through that process she realised that even elders are slowly forgetting many things.

She also spoke about language. Parents often encourage children to learn Malayalam because it helps them manage life outside the community. However, this sometimes leads to children gradually losing connection with their own language.

She also described the difficulty of hostel life. Students must stay away from their homeland for many years in order to study. Hostel life follows strict schedules and routines, which is very different from the freedom they experience in their own community.

Finally, P8 suggested that awareness programs, camps, and community sessions could help people understand the importance of preserving their culture and indigenous knowledge. She believes elders from the community could act as teachers, sharing stories, experiences, and traditional practices with younger generations.

She also suggested that community knowledge could be included in school projects or educational curriculum, so that both the younger generation and outsiders can understand their traditions and culture better.

According to her, people who know even small parts of traditional knowledge should take responsibility to pass it on to the next generation, otherwise many traditions may slowly disappear.

She concluded by saying that preserving cultural roots is very important, and both elders and younger generations must make an effort to keep that knowledge alive.

CASE 9

P9 is a 26-year-old man from Bhoomikuthu. He was the person who accompanied me during my visit to the colony and helped me reach the place where I could meet participants for the interviews. He is originally from the older part of Bhoomikuthu colony and is currently working outside the community.

At first, P9 found it a little difficult to speak openly with me. He seemed hesitant in the beginning, but gradually he became comfortable and began sharing his experiences.

When the researcher asked him about his earliest memories of school, he said that during his childhood he did not fully understand the idea of school or education. According to him, the main reason he went to Anganwadi was because they provided food, toys, and games. He especially remembered the upma they served there. He said that as a child, those things attracted him to go to Anganwadi rather than the idea of studying.

The Anganwadi was located very close to his home, and he used to walk there every day. It was within walking distance, so attending it was easy. The teachers there were not from the community, but from outside. They taught the children in Malayalam.

One of the strongest memories he shared from his school life was related to sports. He remembered that he once played in a cricket tournament, and his team won the match and brought home the cup. He described this as one of the happiest and most memorable moments of his school life.

He also mentioned that during his childhood there were moments when people mocked him because he belonged to a tribal community. However, he said that as he grew older, he stopped caring about such comments. Even now, when he goes to work, there are still some people who make fun of him, but he has learned to ignore it.

When speaking about his childhood life, P9 reflected on the changes that have happened in the community over time. He said that when he was younger, people used to eat many types of forest leaves, fruits, and fibre-rich foods. Tapioca and other natural foods were common. Today many of those foods are rarely seen.

He mentioned a plant called Venni, which used to be available earlier but is difficult to find now. According to him, many such plants and natural foods are slowly disappearing from the community's daily life.

P9 also talked about indigenous knowledge. He said that most of what he knows about traditional practices and forest knowledge came from his grandmother. She used to speak the community language and shared stories and knowledge about their culture and environment. Through her he learned about many traditional practices.

One activity he still enjoys is fishing. Even today he sometimes goes fishing in the local areas. However, he said that many types of fish that were common earlier are now becoming rare.

Along with that, the traditional techniques used for fishing are also disappearing because younger people are not learning them anymore.

When speaking about language, P9 explained that he used to speak the community language frequently when his grandmother was alive and when he stayed at home. But now, because he works outside and interacts with people from different places, he mostly uses Malayalam for communication.

He said that because he does not use the community language regularly anymore, he sometimes forgets certain words. Nowadays he mostly uses it only when speaking with elder people in the community. For daily communication outside the settlement, Malayalam has become more common.

P9 believes that this change happened mainly because people from the community are now more connected with the outside world. To communicate easily with others, Malayalam becomes the preferred language.

He also reflected on how schooling and hostel life affect traditional knowledge. According to him, when children go to school and stay in hostels, they spend most of their time there and do not get exposure to the traditional skills and knowledge of their community. Because of this, many traditional skills are gradually disappearing.

He said that compared to the older generation, today's youth do not possess the same knowledge or skills related to forest life.

Even though he now works outside the community, P9 said that he still prefers the traditional life they once had in the forest. He believes that the cultural and traditional life they lived earlier was in many ways better than the life people are trying to adopt now.

He also mentioned that some traditional songs and cultural practices are still remembered by a few elders in the community. However, fewer people are interested in learning them.

He spoke about the changes in food habits as well. Earlier their common food included simple items such as chamandi made with coconut and green pulses, which was a basic staple in their diet. Today, however, many people prefer foods from outside. He mentioned that nowadays people sometimes eat foods such as Alfaham or Mandi from restaurants.

Because of these changes, he feels that health problems in the community have increased compared to earlier times when people relied more on natural food.

P9 also talked about hostel life. According to him, adapting to hostel life was difficult. Students were allowed to go outside only on Sundays, and even then, only for a short time. After that they had to return to the hostel. This restricted environment was very different from the freedom they experienced in their community.

He also said that earlier there were paddy fields and agricultural lands in the area, but many of those have disappeared now. With these changes, traditional food habits have also changed.

According to him, bringing back some of the older food habits and traditional practices could help improve the health and wellbeing of the community.

P9 suggested that school education should include community knowledge and cultural practices. He believes that when students spend many years studying outside, they eventually return to the community without knowing anything about their own traditions or culture. Because of this, he thinks that schools should provide opportunities for students to learn about their own skills, traditions, and knowledge systems.

After the interview, P9 showed me the places around the colony, including the ground where he used to play cricket. He spoke about these places with a sense of attachment.

Before leaving, he also shared his thoughts about the changes happening in the community. According to him, many people are now imitating the lifestyle of the outside world. They change their habits and ways of living in order to fit into that society. He believes that sometimes people from outside make them feel that their own culture and lifestyle are not valuable. Because of this, people slowly forget the importance of what they already have.

However, P9 said that there are still some people who are trying to bring back and preserve their traditions. He also expressed that if there are any research activities, language preservation programs, or cultural documentation efforts, he would be happy to participate and help in any way he can.

CASE 10

P10 is a 22-year-old student from Bhoomikuthu who is currently pursuing her BA in History. I met her in the colony during my field visit. When I approached her for the interview, she appeared to be a very quiet and soft-spoken person. She did not talk much initially and seemed hesitant to speak. Her responses were short in the beginning, and she mostly answered only when asked specific questions. Her body language showed shyness and a certain level of discomfort in talking with a stranger, but as the conversation continued, she slowly began to share her experiences.

When the researcher asked about her school life, she explained that during her childhood she did not like going to school very much. She said she often felt lazy to go to school, and sometimes she avoided attending. She described herself as a child who did not interact much with others in the classroom. Even when other students spoke with her, she often stayed silent and did not respond much.

She explained that she used to feel afraid and uncomfortable when interacting with others. Because of this, she mostly kept to herself. While talking about these memories, she smiled slightly with shyness, but at the same time there was a sense of sadness when recalling certain experiences.

P10 shared that boys in the school often used to trouble her. She said that they would sometimes pinch her, tease her, or start small fights with her. These incidents made her feel uncomfortable and sometimes frightened. Because of these repeated experiences, she said she began to see the boys in her class almost like enemies, since they were the ones who mostly teased or troubled her during those days.

At the same time, she also mentioned that not everyone behaved badly toward her. She had a few friends who were supportive and kind. However, even with those friendships, she continued to remain quiet and reserved in most situations.

When the discussion moved toward traditional skills and community knowledge, P10 said that she does not know much about the traditional practices of her community. She explained that girls in the community usually do not get many opportunities to learn such skills. According to her, girls are often expected to stay at home and take care of younger siblings or help with household responsibilities.

Because of this, many girls grow up without learning traditional skills such as forest-based activities or other practices that were once common in the community.

Even though she herself does not know many traditional practices, P10 expressed a strong concern that their culture and traditions may disappear in the future. She said that the younger generation is not showing much interest in learning about their traditions, and because of this, many customs may soon vanish.

She also spoke about the changes that have happened in food habits within the community. Earlier, people used to eat fibre-rich foods and natural foods that came from their surroundings. These foods included forest-based items and other traditional foods that were part of their everyday diet.

However, today people depend more on food that comes from outside the community. Packaged foods have become common, especially for snacks. For regular meals also, many families depend on food purchased from outside markets or from the ration shop.

According to P10, this change in food habits has slowly reduced the connection people once had with their traditional food systems.

She also spoke about the loss of indigenous knowledge. She said that although some elders still possess traditional knowledge, the younger generation is not showing interest in learning from them. Because of this gap between generations, much of the knowledge is slowly disappearing.

When I asked about possible ways to preserve these traditions, P10 suggested that community knowledge should be documented in books. She explained that if information about their customs, rituals, and traditional practices is written down, it can help future generations understand and learn about their culture even if the knowledge is not passed down orally.

P10 also spoke about the importance of language. She explained that every person is born with a mother tongue, and for them their community language is something very special. According to her, a mother tongue is unique to each community and carries the identity of that group of people.

She explained that this language is something they receive by birth, and others cannot easily understand or learn it in the same way. Because of this, she believes that using and preserving their mother tongue is very important.

At the same time, she also acknowledged the strong influence of the modern world and modern education. According to her, the influence of the outside society plays a very large role in the disappearance of traditional language and knowledge.

She explained that even when people still know their language, customs, and traditions, the pressure from the outside world often forces them to change. People feel the need to adapt to modern ways of living in order to survive and fit into society.

Because of this pressure, many people slowly start leaving behind their own customs and traditions and begin to follow the lifestyle of the outside world.

P10 reflected that this change does not always happen because people want to forget their traditions, but because they feel that adapting to modern society is necessary in order to move forward in life.

Her reflections showed a deep awareness of how modern education and social pressure influence cultural change within tribal communities.

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

The researcher interviewed Mr. V, who belongs to the Cholanayakan community. He is currently doing his PhD, and he is also someone who supports many students from his community. Many young people in the community look up to him because he encourages them to study and move forward in life. Because he has spent time both inside the community and in the outside academic world, he has observed many changes happening among the younger generation. For this reason, he was able to speak in detail about the transformations taking place in the community.

During the conversation, he first spoke about the changes in food culture. He explained that earlier the people in the community did not follow a strict pattern of eating like breakfast, lunch, or dinner. They used to eat only when they felt hungry. Their food habits were closely connected with their daily activities in the forest. Since most of the food came directly from the forest or from what they collected during the day, eating was not based on time but on need and hunger.

However, things have changed now. Because of the influence of the outside world and modern lifestyle, people have slowly started following the regular meal pattern like the people outside the community. Now many people eat breakfast in the morning, lunch in the afternoon, and dinner at night. According to him, this change might seem small, but it reflects a deeper shift in the way people live and relate to food.

When he spoke about health, he said that there have been both positive and negative changes. On one side, people now have access to hospitals and modern healthcare. Because of this, some health conditions can be treated more easily. But at the same time, many new diseases have appeared in the community. These diseases were not very common earlier when people depended mainly on natural food and physically active lifestyles. He believes that the shift in food habits and lifestyle has played a role in these health changes.

He then spoke about the loss of community knowledge among the younger generation. According to him, earlier children grew up in the forest and learned many things naturally from their surroundings. They did not need formal teaching to understand the forest. By simply living there, they would learn where to walk, how to identify safe paths, where water sources were located, and how to recognize signs of animals in the forest.

But today many children spend most of their time away from the community, especially in schools and hostels.

Because of this, they do not spend enough time in the forest with elders who could teach them these things. As a result, when they come back to the community after many years of schooling, they sometimes find it difficult to adjust to the traditional environment.

He explained that many young people today feel like they are caught between two different worlds. On one side they are learning the ways of the outside world through education, and on the other side they are slowly losing the traditional skills that once helped them live in their own community. Because of this situation, some young people feel confused about where they truly belong.

He also explained the special situation of the Cholanayakan community. According to him, this community is considered one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG). Traditionally, the Cholanayakan people have lived deep inside the forest, sometimes even in caves. Their way of life is very closely connected to the forest environment.

Their language is also unique. It is influenced by several Dravidian languages such as Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam, but it still has its own identity. Because the population of the community is very small, there is a serious concern that both their language and cultural practices may slowly disappear if they are not preserved.

Another challenge he spoke about was the distance between the settlements and the outside world. Many Cholanayakan settlements are located deep inside the forest. To reach the nearest road or transport point, people often have to walk long distances. Because of this, children who go for education usually stay in hostels and spend most of their time away from their families. They return to the community only during long vacations.

According to him, this distance reduces the time children spend with elders and therefore reduces their opportunity to learn traditional knowledge.

He said that the age group between eight and thirteen years is the time when children experience the biggest change. During this stage they move from their natural forest environment into the structured world of schools and hostels. This sudden shift can affect their behaviour, emotions, and sense of belonging.

He also spoke about the physical strength and skills that children traditionally develop in the community. Children growing up in the forest naturally learn many physical skills. They learn how to climb tall trees, collect honey, run long distances, swim in rivers, and carry heavy loads from the forest. These activities make them physically strong and confident.

But children who spend most of their time in schools and hostels do not get these experiences. Even if they gain academic knowledge, they may lose the physical abilities that once helped them survive in the forest environment.

He gave an example of honey collection, which is an important traditional activity. Honey collection is not just a cultural practice but also a potential source of income. However, many young people today do not know how to collect honey safely. For them, watching someone collect honey may even feel like seeing something new or unfamiliar.

When speaking about language, he emphasized that language is closely connected to cultural knowledge. Many traditional practices, medicinal knowledge, and environmental understanding are expressed through their own language. For example, many plants and trees have specific names in the community language that describe their properties or uses.

If people stop using their language, they may also lose the deeper meaning behind this knowledge. Even if Malayalam is used as a substitute language, it cannot fully replace the meanings that exist in their own language.

He also reflected on the difference between life inside the community and life in schools or hostels. In the community, children grow up with a great sense of freedom. They move around freely in the forest, and elders guide them gently rather than forcing strict rules.

But in schools and hostels the environment is very different. Students must follow strict schedules and rules. Their movements are limited, and they often have only a small amount of time for recreation. For children who are used to living freely in the forest, this change can make them feel bored or stressed.

He said that he himself experienced these feelings during his own school days.

Another issue he mentioned was the emotional stress faced by students in hostels. Being separated from their families and communities for long periods can make students feel lonely. In their community environment, people grow up surrounded by strong relationships and emotional support. But in hostels they may not always find someone who understands their background or feelings.

At the same time, he also recognized that some positive changes have happened due to contact with the outside world. For example, people have become more aware of personal cleanliness, dressing neatly, and presenting themselves confidently in public.

He also spoke about the growing gap between generations. Elders in the community possess deep knowledge about forest life, medicinal plants, and cultural rituals. However, some elders feel hesitant to share this knowledge with younger people. This is partly because they feel that younger generations may not respect or value this knowledge anymore.

Traditionally, knowledge was shared only with people who showed genuine interest and respect.

He also mentioned that some young people experience identity struggles when they interact with the outside world. When they reveal their background, they sometimes face misunderstanding or even mockery. Because of this, some individuals feel uncomfortable openly expressing their identity outside the community.

He believes that the education system should change in ways that respect and include community knowledge. According to him, students should learn not only academic subjects but also about their own culture, traditions, and environment. Activities related to forest conservation, traditional knowledge, and community practices could be included in the curriculum.

He also spoke about certain social problems that are beginning to appear in the community. One of the biggest concerns he mentioned was the growing problem of alcohol use among young people. According to him, this influence has come mainly from outside interactions. Some young people misunderstand the idea of freedom and independence and misuse it.

At the same time, he emphasized that the community also has strong positive values that should be recognized and preserved. For example, in their community there is a strong sense of collective care. If a child becomes an orphan, that child is not left alone. Instead, the child is welcomed and cared for by different families in the community. People treat such children with love and respect.

He also mentioned that gender roles are not strongly divided in many traditional activities. Men and women often work together in forest activities and household responsibilities. This shared sense of work and cooperation is something he believes the outside world could also learn from.

Towards the end of the conversation, he reflected on the purpose of education. According to him, education should help people learn to read, write, and understand the world around them. But it should also allow individuals to develop their own interests and talents.

He criticized the idea of judging students only through marks or examination results. In his opinion, a single certificate cannot truly measure a person's abilities or knowledge.

He also expressed concern about the scribe system used in examinations, where someone else writes answers for the student. According to him, this practice sometimes helps institutions maintain high pass percentages but does not truly help students learn.

In the end, he expressed that the current situation is painful and complex. Many students from the community are gaining exposure to education, but at the same time they are slowly losing their language, traditional knowledge, physical skills, and emotional connection with their community.

He believes that the future of the community depends on finding a balance where young people can gain education while still preserving their language, culture, knowledge, and identity. Only then can both worlds coexist without one destroying the other.

CHAPTER V: THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The present chapter analyses and interprets the lived experiences of tribal students belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur. The analysis is based on the narratives shared by participants during in-depth interviews and field interactions conducted as part of the study. Since the research follows a phenomenological approach, the chapter primarily focuses on understanding the meanings, emotions, perceptions, and experiences associated with mainstream education, cultural transition, and indigenous identity among the participants.

The interviews revealed that the experiences of tribal students are not limited to educational access or academic learning alone. Instead, participants reflected on a wide range of emotional, linguistic, social, and cultural experiences connected with schooling, hostel life, identity, language use, and relationships with community life. While education created opportunities for mobility, exposure, and aspirations, it also contributed to experiences of hesitation, loneliness, language shift, cultural disconnection, and reduced participation in indigenous practices among many participants.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and meanings across the interviews. Through repeated reading, coding, and interpretation of the data, several major themes and sub themes emerged from the participants' narratives. These themes reflect the broader realities of educational displacement, cultural transition, identity negotiation, and changing indigenous life within the context of mainstream education.

The chapter is therefore organised into different thematic sections based on the common experiences and perspectives shared by participants. The analysis also includes selected participant narratives and reflections in order to preserve the phenomenological and lived-experience orientation of the study. Through this thematic discussion, the chapter attempts to understand how tribal students negotiate between mainstream educational environments and their indigenous cultural roots within contemporary social realities.

5.2 PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

The present study included participants belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan tribal communities residing in selected settlement areas of Nilambur in Malappuram district. A total of ten participants and one key informant were included in the study.

Among the participants, seven were female and three were male. The age of the participants ranged from 15 to 36 years. The participants included school-going students, college students, working youth, and individuals who had discontinued their education. This variation in age, educational exposure, and life experience helped provide diverse and intergenerational perspectives regarding education, identity, language, and cultural transition within the community.

The participants came from different educational backgrounds and levels of exposure to mainstream society. Most participants had studied in Malayalam-medium schools, while several had experienced hostel life through Model Residential Schools (MRS) and other educational institutions outside their settlements. Some participants had continued into higher education and employment, whereas others had discontinued their studies because of personal, emotional, academic, or social difficulties. These varied educational experiences contributed important insights into the ways tribal students negotiate between mainstream education and indigenous community life.

The study included participants from both Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities. Although the experiences shared by participants differed in many ways, several common concerns emerged across both communities, particularly regarding language shift, educational adjustment, discrimination, hostel life, weakening participation in indigenous practices, and changing relationships with traditional knowledge systems. At the same time, participants also reflected differently on issues such as cultural preservation, identity, and adaptation to mainstream society. While some participants strongly emphasised the importance of protecting their mother tongue and indigenous traditions, others viewed adaptation to dominant social and educational environments as more necessary for educational mobility and future opportunities. These differing perspectives revealed the complex and often contradictory realities experienced by younger generations within tribal communities today.

Several participants had spent long periods staying in hostels as part of their educational journey. These experiences significantly influenced their emotional wellbeing, language use, social interaction, and connection with family and community life. Participants frequently reflected on homesickness, restricted hostel routines, loneliness, and reduced involvement in community activities and cultural events. At the same time, some participants also acknowledged that hostel education created opportunities for exposure, confidence building, academic support, and future aspirations.

The study also included participants who were actively engaged in community work, cultural initiatives, and educational support activities.

Such participants provided deeper reflections regarding indigenous knowledge systems, language preservation, modernisation, and the changing realities within the community. Their experiences helped the study understand how formal education, modernisation, and exposure to outside society influence cultural continuity, identity formation, and indigenous belonging among tribal youth in Nilambur.

5.3 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the interviews revealed that the educational experiences of tribal students are deeply connected with emotional, cultural, linguistic, and social realities within their everyday lives. Although mainstream education created opportunities for literacy, exposure, confidence, and future aspirations, participants repeatedly reflected on experiences of cultural disconnection, language shift, emotional isolation, and weakening participation in indigenous practices. The analysis showed that tribal students often negotiate between two different social worlds — one shaped by institutional education, dominant-language learning, hostel life, and mainstream expectations, and another rooted in indigenous identity, community belonging, oral traditions, and ecological knowledge systems.

The narratives shared by participants revealed that educational displacement does not occur only through physical movement from settlements to schools or hostels, but also through gradual emotional and cultural distancing from indigenous community life. Several participants explained that prolonged exposure to mainstream educational environments influenced their language use, social interaction, food habits, lifestyle patterns, and relationship with traditional practices. Many participants stated that younger generations today spend less time with elders, participate less in forest-based activities, and possess limited knowledge regarding traditional ecological practices, rituals, and indigenous language compared to earlier generations.

Another important pattern emerging from the analysis was the decline in mother tongue use among younger generations. Participants from both Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities expressed concern that children are increasingly encouraged to speak Malayalam rather than their indigenous language. In many cases, parents themselves avoided teaching the mother tongue because they believed Malayalam would help children adjust better within schools and outside society. Several participants reflected that fear of discrimination, social shame, and the desire for educational mobility contributed to this language shift. As a result, indigenous languages are gradually becoming restricted to communication among elders within the settlements.

Participants repeatedly expressed concern that if the present situation continues, future generations may lose connection with their traditional language completely.

Hostel life emerged as another major area influencing emotional wellbeing and cultural continuity among tribal students. Participants who had stayed in Model Residential Schools and hostels described experiences of homesickness, loneliness, emotional restriction, and reduced participation in family and community activities. Many participants explained that long periods spent away from settlements limited opportunities for interaction with elders and participation in rituals, festivals, and everyday cultural learning. Some participants also reflected on the difficulty of adjusting to hostel discipline, institutional routines, and unfamiliar social environments during childhood.

At the same time, a few participants acknowledged that hostel education helped improve confidence, communication skills, and exposure to outside society. These experiences reflected the complex relationship between educational opportunity and emotional-cultural separation within mainstream educational systems.

The findings of the present study can be interpreted through both the Indigenous Knowledge Perspective and the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective presented in Chapter 2. From the Indigenous Knowledge Perspective, language is understood as more than a means of communication; it is a repository of cultural identity, collective memory, traditional ecological knowledge, and community values (Battiste, 2013). The gradual decline in the use of indigenous languages among younger generations, as reflected in the participants' narratives, therefore represents not only a linguistic shift but also a weakening of the processes through which indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage are transmitted across generations. The reduced use of the mother tongue within families, schools, and hostels illustrates how educational experiences can contribute to educational displacement by creating distance from indigenous ways of knowing and living.

The findings also support the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective, which emphasises that learners' home languages and cultural backgrounds should be recognised as valuable resources within educational settings (Gay, 2018). Participants explained that Malayalam became the dominant language in schools and hostels, while indigenous languages received little recognition or encouragement. This reflects an educational environment in which adaptation to the dominant language is often necessary for academic participation and social acceptance. Such experiences contributed to feelings of cultural disconnection and reduced opportunities for maintaining indigenous linguistic identity.

Together, these theoretical perspectives help explain why language decline emerged as one of the central experiences of the participants. The findings suggest that preserving indigenous languages requires educational approaches that respect and incorporate students' linguistic and cultural heritage rather than expecting complete assimilation into dominant educational practices. In this way, the study demonstrates that language preservation is closely connected to educational inclusion, cultural continuity, and the strengthening of indigenous identity.

5.3.1 Language Shift and Decline of Mother Tongue

One of the most significant themes emerging from the interviews was the gradual decline in the use of indigenous mother tongue languages among younger generations within the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities. Almost all respondents reflected on how mainstream education, Malayalam-medium schooling, hostel life, modernization, and increasing interaction with outside society have influenced language practices within their communities. The narratives revealed that language shift is not merely a linguistic transformation, but also a process closely connected with identity, emotional belonging, intergenerational relationships, and cultural continuity. Many community members expressed concern that younger generations today are increasingly unable to speak their indigenous language fluently, and several feared that these languages may eventually disappear if active preservation efforts are not undertaken.

According to several interviewees, earlier generations used indigenous language naturally within everyday life, family interaction, forest activities, rituals, storytelling, and communication inside the settlement. Elders possessed strong fluency in the language and used it as an important part of community identity and collective memory. However, many respondents observed that children today primarily communicate in Malayalam, especially after entering schools and hostels. Some younger participants explained that although they understand certain words and expressions in their mother tongue, they often find it difficult to speak fluently or confidently. The weakening of language transmission between parents and children therefore emerged as one of the most visible signs of cultural transition within the community.

A participant from the Kattunayakan community emotionally reflected that although her parents spoke the indigenous language fluently among themselves and with elders, they intentionally avoided teaching it to their children. During the interview, she explained that when she later questioned her mother regarding this issue, her mother responded that they believed Malayalam would help children adjust better within schools and outside society. The participant expressed regret that she had grown

up without fluency in her own mother tongue and felt that an important part of her identity had gradually weakened over time. Her experience revealed how fear of exclusion and social stigma indirectly contributed to the decline of indigenous language transmission within families.

Experiences of discrimination and social shame also emerged as important factors influencing language decline. Several participants stated that tribal students often hesitate to speak their mother tongue outside the settlement because of fear of ridicule or negative stereotypes associated with tribal identity. One respondent explained that people immediately identify them as “tribal” or “forest people” when they hear the language, and this sometimes creates embarrassment and hesitation in public spaces. Another participant reflected, “Now children speak Malayalam more than our own language. Earlier people used our language naturally, but now only elders speak fluently.” Such narratives revealed how educational and social environments indirectly create pressure to adapt to dominant linguistic practices in order to achieve acceptance and educational mobility.

The influence of hostel life and residential schooling also appeared strongly within the discussions on language shift. Participants who had stayed in Model Residential Schools explained that students spend long periods away from their settlements and interact mainly in Malayalam with teachers, hostel wardens, and students from different communities. Since indigenous language use becomes limited within such institutional settings, children slowly become disconnected from everyday mother tongue communication. Several respondents observed that students returning from hostels increasingly continue speaking Malayalam even within the settlement and sometimes communicate less with elders in their own language. This gradual shift was described by many participants as one of the major changes taking place among younger generations today.

The emotional and cultural consequences of language decline were repeatedly emphasized throughout the interviews. Many community members believed that language is deeply connected with identity, memory, traditional knowledge, and emotional belonging. According to them, when younger generations lose fluency in their mother tongue, they also gradually lose connection with oral traditions, songs, stories, rituals, ecological knowledge, and communication with elders. One participant explained that many traditional practices and indigenous knowledge systems cannot be fully understood through Malayalam because they are closely tied to cultural meanings embedded within the community’s own language. Another respondent emotionally stated that if preservation efforts are not undertaken now, future generations may only remember that “there was once a language like this,” without being able to understand or speak it.

Participants from both Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities reflected that indigenous languages are increasingly becoming restricted to older generations within the settlements. Several younger respondents admitted that they often reply in Malayalam even when elders speak to them in their mother tongue. Some community members explained that modern parents themselves encourage Malayalam use because they believe educational success, employment opportunities, and social mobility depend upon fluency in the dominant language. Although participants acknowledged the practical importance of Malayalam within educational and professional spaces, many simultaneously feared that complete dependence on dominant-language communication may eventually result in cultural erasure and weakening indigenous identity.

The interviews further revealed that language decline is closely related to broader experiences of educational displacement and cultural disconnection. Mainstream schooling systems largely function through dominant-language instruction, standardised curriculum, and institutional routines that provide very limited space for indigenous language use or culturally rooted learning practices. As tribal students spend increasing amounts of time within schools, hostels, digital spaces, and outside social environments, opportunities for learning language naturally through interaction with elders and participation in community life gradually reduce. Several respondents explained that children today spend less time listening to stories, participating in traditional activities, and engaging in forest-based learning practices where indigenous language was once used continuously within everyday life.

At the same time, many participants strongly emphasised the importance of language preservation and revitalisation within the community. Several respondents suggested that indigenous languages should be taught informally through storytelling sessions, cultural gatherings, interaction with elders, and community learning spaces such as Padanamuri. Some participants also believed that schools and hostel institutions should create opportunities where tribal students can learn and use their mother tongue without fear, shame, or discrimination. According to many interviewees, preserving indigenous language is not simply about protecting words or communication systems, but about safeguarding identity, dignity, collective memory, and indigenous existence itself.

The findings of the present study therefore indicate that language shift within tribal communities is deeply connected with mainstream education, modernisation, social adaptation, and fear of exclusion. At the same time, the narratives reveal that indigenous language continues to hold strong emotional, cultural, and symbolic significance within community life.

The gradual decline of mother tongue use among younger generations thus reflects not only linguistic transformation, but also broader processes of educational displacement, cultural transition, and changing indigenous identity within contemporary tribal society.

5.3.2 Hostel Life and Emotional Disconnection

Hostel life and residential schooling emerged as another major theme influencing the educational and emotional experiences of tribal students within the present study. Many respondents had spent significant periods of their childhood and adolescence in Model Residential Schools (MRS) and hostel institutions located away from their settlements. Although several students acknowledged that hostel education created opportunities for schooling, exposure, discipline, and future aspirations, the interviews simultaneously revealed experiences of homesickness, loneliness, emotional restriction, cultural separation, and reduced connection with family and community life. The narratives showed that hostel environments often became spaces where tribal students gradually adapted to institutional routines while simultaneously experiencing emotional and cultural distancing from their indigenous surroundings.

Several interviewees explained that staying away from home at a young age was emotionally difficult during the initial stages of hostel life. Many students described feelings of fear, sadness, and discomfort when first separated from parents, siblings, and familiar settlement environments. Some respondents stated that they frequently cried during the early days of hostel admission and struggled to adjust to unfamiliar surroundings, food habits, routines, and social environments. One participant reflected that hostel life initially felt highly restrictive because students were required to follow fixed schedules for eating, studying, sleeping, and other daily activities, which differed greatly from the more flexible and community-oriented lifestyle within the settlements.

Homesickness emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews. Several hostel students explained that they constantly missed their family members, settlement life, forests, and the emotional comfort associated with home environments. One respondent emotionally stated, “We waited for holidays so we could go back home and stay with our family.” Another participant explained that although hostel education provided educational opportunities, children emotionally remained attached to their homeland and community life. Such reflections revealed that educational mobility often involved emotional separation from spaces associated with belonging, safety, cultural familiarity, and indigenous identity.

Respondents also reflected on how prolonged hostel life reduced opportunities for interaction with elders and participation in indigenous cultural practices. Since students spent most of the academic year within institutional settings, many explained that they gradually became less involved in rituals, festivals, storytelling, forest visits, and community gatherings. Some interviewees believed that hostel education indirectly weakened intergenerational learning processes because children remained physically absent from settlements during important periods of cultural participation and everyday community interaction. According to one participant, earlier generations learned traditions naturally by living within the community and observing elders during daily life, whereas hostel students today spend much of their childhood within institutional environments disconnected from such experiences.

Another important issue emerging from the interviews was the influence of hostel environments on language use and communication patterns. Respondents explained that Malayalam became the dominant language within schools and hostels because students from different tribal and non-tribal backgrounds studied together. As a result, indigenous language use gradually reduced within educational spaces. Several participants observed that students returning from hostels increasingly continued using Malayalam even while communicating inside the settlement. One respondent explained that younger hostel students sometimes feel hesitant to speak their mother tongue publicly because they become more accustomed to Malayalam communication within institutional settings. This reflected how hostel life contributed not only to physical separation from community life but also to gradual linguistic and cultural transformation among younger generations.

The interviews further revealed the emotional and psychological adjustments required within hostile environments. Some participants described hostel life as emotionally isolating, especially during childhood. Students experienced limited privacy, restricted movement, and less emotional support compared to family environments. A few respondents explained that tribal students often felt shy or hesitant while interacting with students from outside communities, particularly during the initial stages of schooling. Feelings of inferiority, silence, and social withdrawal were described by some interviewees as part of their educational journey. However, these experiences varied depending upon personality, institutional atmosphere, peer relationships, and duration of hostel exposure.

At the same time, several participants also acknowledged positive aspects associated with hostel education. Some respondents believed that hostel life improved their confidence, discipline, communication skills, and ability to interact with wider society. A few students explained that exposure to different people and educational opportunities gradually helped them become more independent and socially confident.

One participant reflected that although the beginning was emotionally difficult, hostel education later helped in developing self-confidence and awareness regarding education and future aspirations. Such narratives revealed that hostel experiences cannot be understood only negatively, but rather as complex spaces where educational opportunity and emotional-cultural disconnection coexist simultaneously.

The interviews also indicated that hostel education influenced children's everyday lifestyle practices and relationships with indigenous environments. Several respondents observed that students staying in hostels gradually became less familiar with forest-based activities, traditional food practices, agricultural participation, and indigenous ecological learning. Since hostel routines were largely disconnected from settlement life and forest interaction, opportunities for experiential cultural learning reduced significantly. Some participants expressed concern that younger generations growing up mainly within institutional educational environments may eventually lose practical understanding regarding traditional knowledge systems, medicinal plants, honey collection, and community survival practices that were once naturally learned through participation in daily life.

Another concern raised by community members was that hostel systems often prioritize academic discipline and institutional adjustment without adequately recognizing the emotional and cultural realities of tribal students. Some respondents believed that educational institutions rarely create spaces where students can openly express indigenous identity, language, cultural practices, or emotional difficulties associated with separation from community life. A few participants suggested that schools and hostels should introduce culturally sensitive support systems that encourage interaction with elders, cultural learning activities, indigenous language use, and emotional wellbeing among tribal students. According to them, educational inclusion should not focus only on literacy and academic achievement, but also on protecting emotional belonging and cultural dignity within educational environments.

The findings of the present study therefore indicate that hostel life plays a significant role in shaping the emotional, cultural, and educational experiences of tribal students. While residential schooling creates important opportunities for educational access and social mobility, it simultaneously contributes to experiences of homesickness, cultural distancing, language shift, and reduced participation in indigenous community life. The experiences shared by respondents reveal that hostel education often becomes a space where tribal students negotiate between educational aspiration and emotional attachment to their cultural roots.

Thus, hostel life reflects the broader realities of educational displacement and cultural disconnection experienced by indigenous students within mainstream educational systems.

From the Indigenous Knowledge Perspective, learning is viewed as a process that extends beyond formal schooling and takes place through daily interaction with family members, elders, community life, and the natural environment (Battiste, 2013). The participants' experiences suggest that prolonged residence in hostels reduced opportunities for engaging in these community-based learning processes. Separation from their settlements limited regular interaction with elders, participation in cultural rituals, and involvement in traditional practices through which indigenous knowledge is transmitted across generations. In this way, hostel life contributed not only to physical separation but also to educational displacement and cultural disconnection.

The findings also reflect the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective, which emphasizes that educational institutions should recognize and respond to students' cultural backgrounds, emotional needs, and lived experiences (Gay, 2018). Participants described feelings of homesickness, loneliness, emotional isolation, and difficulties adjusting to hostel routines during childhood. These experiences suggest that while hostel education expands educational opportunities, institutional environments may not always provide culturally responsive support that acknowledges tribal students' emotional attachment to their families, communities, and cultural identity.

Together, these perspectives help explain the dual nature of hostel education experienced by the participants. Although residential schooling promoted educational access, confidence, and future aspirations for many students, it also created emotional and cultural challenges that influenced their sense of belonging and connection with their indigenous communities. The findings therefore highlight the importance of developing hostel environments that promote both academic achievement and cultural continuity through culturally responsive support systems, stronger community engagement, and opportunities for maintaining indigenous language and cultural practices.

5.3.3 Educational Mobility and Identity Negotiation

Another important theme emerging from the analysis was the complex relationship between educational mobility and identity negotiation among tribal students. The interviews revealed that mainstream education created opportunities for literacy, exposure, confidence, employment aspirations, and social mobility for many participants.

At the same time, respondents also reflected on experiences of hesitation, identity insecurity, cultural adjustment, and emotional conflict while moving between indigenous community life and mainstream educational environments. The narratives showed that tribal students often negotiate between two different social realities one associated with modern education, institutional expectations, and dominant social norms, and another connected with indigenous identity, community belonging, cultural traditions, and settlement life.

Several respondents explained that entering mainstream educational spaces exposed them to unfamiliar social environments and interactions outside their community. Some participants stated that they initially felt shy, silent, or hesitant while studying with students from non-tribal backgrounds. A few interviewees reflected that they became more conscious of their identity after entering schools and hostels where tribal students formed a minority group. According to some respondents, differences in language, dressing patterns, lifestyle, and cultural background sometimes made them feel socially distant from other students. One participant explained that during the early years of schooling, she mostly interacted only with students belonging to her own community because she felt uncomfortable and insecure while interacting with others.

Experiences of discrimination and stereotyping also influenced identity negotiation among several participants. Some respondents explained that after others learned they belonged to a tribal community, they occasionally experienced ridicule, mockery, or social distancing. A participant reflected that people often associated tribal identity with backwardness or “forest life,” which created embarrassment and hesitation within educational spaces.

Another respondent stated that situations where tribal students were publicly identified for scholarships or benefits sometimes made them feel exposed and different from other students. Such experiences contributed to feelings of inferiority and emotional discomfort among some participants during their educational journey.

At the same time, the interviews revealed that educational exposure also helped several participants gradually develop confidence and broader social awareness. Some students explained that although they initially struggled to adjust within schools and hostels, they later became more comfortable interacting with people outside their community. A few respondents reflected that education improved their communication skills, confidence, independence, and understanding of the outside world. One participant stated that hostel life and higher education helped her openly identify herself as belonging to the Kattunayakan community without fear or shame.

These narratives indicated that educational environments sometimes functioned as spaces where students gradually negotiated and reconstructed their identity through new social experiences and exposure.

The findings further showed that many tribal students experience emotional tension while balancing educational aspirations and attachment to indigenous community life. Several respondents expressed a desire to continue education, secure employment, and achieve social mobility, while simultaneously fearing the gradual weakening of language, traditions, and indigenous practices within their community. Some participants believed that educational success often required adaptation to dominant social norms, language use, and lifestyle practices, which indirectly created distance from indigenous cultural identity. One respondent reflected that younger generations today are increasingly influenced by modern lifestyles and outside social environments, resulting in reduced participation in traditional practices and community interaction.

The interviews also revealed differing attitudes among participants regarding modernisation and adaptation to mainstream society. Some respondents strongly emphasised the importance of preserving indigenous language, traditions, rituals, and ecological knowledge even while pursuing education and employment opportunities. Others believed that adapting to modern society was necessary for survival, educational progress, and economic security. These differing viewpoints reflected the complex realities faced by tribal youth who must simultaneously navigate cultural continuity and social mobility within contemporary society.

Another important issue emerging from the analysis was the transformation of self-perception among younger generations. Some participants explained that educational exposure gradually changed the way they viewed their own community and cultural practices. A few respondents observed that some tribal students hesitate to openly express indigenous identity because they fear social judgement or exclusion within mainstream environments. At the same time, other participants reflected that education and outside exposure also created greater awareness regarding indigenous rights, language preservation, and cultural dignity. Such narratives demonstrated that identity negotiation among tribal students is not fixed or uniform, but shaped continuously through educational experiences, social interaction, discrimination, and personal reflection.

Several respondents also reflected on the generational changes taking place within their communities. According to them, earlier generations remained closely connected with forests, traditional occupations, rituals, and indigenous ways of life, whereas younger generations today increasingly

aspire towards formal employment, modern lifestyles, digital technology, and urban forms of social mobility. While participants acknowledged the importance of educational progress and economic improvement, many simultaneously feared that rapid cultural transformation may weaken collective identity and intergenerational continuity within the community. One respondent expressed concern that younger children today spend less time with elders and possess limited knowledge regarding indigenous practices that were once naturally learned through everyday participation within settlement life.

The interviews further suggested that identity negotiation among tribal students is deeply connected with broader experiences of educational displacement and cultural disconnection. Mainstream educational systems often encourage adaptation to dominant cultural norms while providing limited recognition to indigenous identity, language, and knowledge systems. As students spend increasing amounts of time within schools, hostels, and outside social environments, they gradually learn to adjust themselves according to mainstream expectations in order to gain acceptance and educational success. However, this process frequently creates emotional conflict between the desire for social mobility and attachment to indigenous belonging.

Despite these challenges, many participants strongly believed that education and cultural preservation should coexist rather than function in opposition to one another. Several respondents emphasised that tribal students should receive opportunities for education and employment without being forced to abandon their language, traditions, and cultural identity. Some participants suggested that educational institutions should create more inclusive and culturally sensitive spaces where tribal students can express indigenous identity without fear of discrimination or shame. According to them, education becomes meaningful only when it supports both social mobility and cultural dignity among indigenous communities.

The findings of the present study therefore indicate that educational mobility among tribal students is closely connected with processes of identity negotiation, social adaptation, and cultural transition. While mainstream education creates important opportunities for exposure, confidence, and future aspirations, it also influences how tribal students perceive themselves, their community, and their cultural identity within wider society. The experiences shared by respondents reveal that educational journeys among tribal youth are often shaped by continuous negotiation between mainstream expectations and indigenous belonging, reflecting the broader realities of educational displacement and cultural disconnection within contemporary tribal life.

The findings can be understood through both the Indigenous Knowledge Perspective and the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective. The Indigenous Knowledge Perspective suggests that identity is closely connected with indigenous language, culture, and community relationships (Battiste, 2013). The participants' experiences indicate that mainstream education influenced not only their educational aspirations but also their sense of cultural belonging and identity. Similarly, the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective (Gay, 2018) emphasises that educational institutions should recognise and respect students' cultural identities. The participants' experiences of adaptation, identity negotiation, and discrimination highlight the need for educational environments that support both academic achievement and the preservation of indigenous identity.

5.3.4 Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Transition

Another major theme emerging from the interviews was the gradual transformation and weakening of indigenous knowledge systems among younger generations within the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities. Participants repeatedly reflected on how mainstream education, modernisation, changing lifestyles, hostel life, and increasing dependence on outside society have influenced traditional learning practices and community knowledge systems. The narratives revealed that indigenous knowledge was historically transmitted through everyday participation in community life, close interaction with elders, and direct engagement with forests and nature. However, many respondents believed that these traditional modes of learning are gradually declining among younger generations today.

Several community members explained that earlier generations possessed extensive ecological knowledge related to forests, medicinal plants, honey collection, food gathering, wildlife behaviour, seasonal changes, and survival practices. According to respondents, such knowledge was not learned through formal instruction, but through observation, participation, storytelling, and continuous interaction with elders and the natural environment. Children traditionally accompanied parents and elders during forest visits, agricultural activities, and community practices, through which they gradually learned indigenous skills and ecological understanding as part of everyday life.

However, many interviewees expressed concern that younger generations today spend significantly less time engaging with forests, elders, and traditional activities compared to earlier generations. Some respondents explained that children now spend most of their time within schools, hostels, tuition environments, mobile phones, and digital spaces, resulting in reduced participation in community-based learning. One participant reflected that earlier children naturally learned about

plants, forests, animals, and traditional practices while growing up within the settlement, whereas many students today possess only limited knowledge regarding such practices. Another respondent explained that younger generations are increasingly familiar with modern technology and outside social environments, but often lack practical understanding regarding indigenous ecological systems that were once central to community life.

The interviews revealed that educational transition has significantly influenced the ways knowledge is valued within the community. Several respondents felt that mainstream education often prioritizes textbook knowledge, examinations, and formal qualifications while giving limited recognition to indigenous ways of learning. As a result, traditional ecological knowledge and oral practices are sometimes viewed as less important by younger generations who are increasingly oriented towards formal education and employment opportunities. Some community members expressed concern that many students today focus primarily on academic success and government jobs while gradually losing interest in traditional occupations, forest interaction, and indigenous cultural practices.

Participants also reflected on the weakening of intergenerational knowledge transmission within the settlements. Since many students spend long periods away from home in hostels and educational institutions, opportunities for continuous interaction with elders have reduced considerably. Several respondents explained that earlier generations learned through daily observation and participation within family and community environments, whereas younger hostel students remain physically separated from such experiences for much of their childhood. One participant stated that many elders still possess extensive knowledge regarding medicinal plants, forest routes, traditional food systems, and rituals, but younger generations often show limited interest or lack sufficient time to learn such practices in detail.

Another important issue emerging from the interviews was the relationship between indigenous knowledge and language. Some respondents explained that traditional ecological knowledge is closely connected with indigenous language because many plant names, forest practices, oral expressions, and ritual meanings cannot be fully translated into Malayalam. According to them, the decline of mother tongue use also contributes indirectly to the weakening of indigenous knowledge systems. One interviewee reflected that when children lose fluency in their own language, they gradually become disconnected from the stories, meanings, and cultural understandings embedded within community life. Thus, language decline and knowledge loss were experienced by many participants as interconnected processes of cultural transition.

The interviews also highlighted visible changes in food habits, lifestyle patterns, and everyday practices within the community. Several respondents explained that earlier generations depended more upon forest foods, locally available vegetables, tubers, medicinal herbs, and traditional diets connected with ecological surroundings. However, many participants observed that rice-based food habits, packaged foods, and outside consumption patterns have increasingly replaced traditional food practices among younger generations. Some community members believed that these lifestyle transformations have affected both cultural continuity and community health over time.

Despite these concerns, several participants strongly emphasized the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge systems for future generations. Some respondents believed that traditional knowledge should be documented systematically before it disappears completely with older generations. Participants involved in community work and cultural initiatives explained that interaction with elders often helps revive forgotten memories, stories, medicinal practices, and ecological understanding within the community. One participant reflected that elders initially claimed they had forgotten many traditional practices but gradually began recalling knowledge when conversations and documentation efforts continued over time. Such experiences demonstrated the importance of community engagement and intergenerational dialogue in preserving indigenous knowledge.

Many respondents also suggested that educational institutions and community spaces should create opportunities for younger generations to learn about indigenous culture, forest ecology, language, medicinal plants, and traditional practices. Some participants proposed the use of community learning centres such as “Padanamuri” for cultural education and storytelling activities involving elders and children. Others suggested that digital technology, games, videos, and mobile applications could also be used creatively to teach indigenous knowledge to younger generations in ways that are meaningful and engaging within contemporary society. These perspectives revealed that participants did not completely reject modernisation or education but rather hoped for a balance between educational progress and cultural preservation.

The findings of the present study therefore indicate that indigenous knowledge systems within the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities are undergoing significant transformation under the influence of mainstream education, modernisation, and changing social realities. While educational exposure and technological advancement have created new opportunities and aspirations among younger generations, they have also contributed to reduced participation in traditional learning practices and ecological interaction.

The experiences shared by respondents reveal that the decline of indigenous knowledge is closely connected with broader processes of language shift, educational displacement, cultural disconnection, and weakening intergenerational continuity within tribal communities today.

The findings strongly reflect the Indigenous Knowledge Perspective, which recognises indigenous knowledge as a valuable system of learning transmitted through language, community life, and interaction with nature (Battiste, 2013). The participants' experiences suggest that mainstream education, hostel life, and modernisation have reduced opportunities for the transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations. The findings also support the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective (Gay, 2018), which emphasises that educational institutions should acknowledge and integrate indigenous knowledge and cultural experiences into the learning process. This highlights the importance of promoting educational practices that preserve both indigenous knowledge and cultural identity

5.3.5 Modernization and Changing Lifestyle Practices

Modernisation and changing lifestyle practices emerged as another important theme influencing the social and cultural realities of tribal communities within the present study. Participants repeatedly reflected on how increasing exposure to mainstream society, formal education, digital technology, urban influence, and changing economic conditions have transformed everyday life among younger generations within the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities. While several respondents acknowledged that modernisation has created opportunities for educational progress, communication, employment aspirations, and improved living conditions, many simultaneously expressed concern regarding the gradual weakening of traditional lifestyles, food habits, social relationships, and cultural practices within the community.

Several community members explained that earlier generations lived in closer relationship with forests, nature, and collective community life. Everyday activities such as food gathering, agriculture, honey collection, forest visits, storytelling, rituals, and interaction with elders formed an important part of daily living. According to many respondents, life within the settlement was once more community-oriented, and children naturally learned social values, traditions, and indigenous practices through participation in everyday activities. However, participants observed that younger generations today increasingly spend time within schools, hostels, mobile phones, social media, and outside social environments, resulting in visible changes in lifestyle patterns and social interaction.

The influence of digital technology and mobile phone usage emerged strongly within the interviews. Several respondents explained that children and youth today are highly attracted towards mobile phones, online entertainment, games, and social media platforms. Some participants expressed concern that excessive engagement with digital spaces has reduced children's interaction with elders, forests, and traditional community activities. One respondent reflected, "Now children know mobile phones better than the forest." Another participant explained that earlier children spent more time outdoors, participating in agricultural activities and learning from elders, whereas many younger students today remain occupied with digital entertainment during their free time. Such narratives reflected broader transformations in childhood experiences and learning environments within the community.

Changes in food habits and health practices also emerged as important concerns among several participants. Many respondents explained that earlier generations depended more upon traditional food systems that included forest-based foods, tubers, leafy vegetables, locally available resources, and naturally grown products. However, participants observed that rice-based diets, packaged food items, outside food consumption, and modern eating habits have increasingly replaced traditional food practices among younger generations. Some community members believed that these changes have negatively influenced both physical health and cultural continuity within the community. A few interviewees stated that earlier food practices were closely connected with forest knowledge, seasonal understanding, and ecological interaction, whereas present-day consumption patterns are increasingly shaped by outside markets and modern lifestyle influences.

Several participants also reflected on changing attitudes towards traditional occupations and forest-based livelihoods. According to respondents, earlier generations depended significantly upon forest resources, agriculture, honey collection, and indigenous survival practices for everyday living. However, younger generations today increasingly aspire towards formal education, salaried employment, government jobs, and urban lifestyles. Some community members acknowledged that such aspirations are understandable because education and employment provide economic security and social mobility. At the same time, many expressed concern that gradual detachment from traditional occupations may weaken practical knowledge systems and reduce younger generations' connection with forests and indigenous identity.

The interviews further revealed that modernisation has influenced patterns of social interaction and collective community life within the settlements. Some respondents observed that earlier generations

participated more actively in rituals, festivals, storytelling gatherings, and collective cultural activities. However, many participants believed that younger generations today show reduced involvement in such practices because of educational commitments, hostel life, mobile phone usage, and changing interests. One participant explained that community interaction itself has changed significantly over time, as people now spend more time individually engaged with technology and outside activities rather than participating collectively within settlement life.

At the same time, respondents did not completely reject modernisation or educational progress. Several participants acknowledged that modern education, technology, transportation, and communication systems have improved awareness, healthcare access, social interaction, and opportunities for younger generations. Some interviewees believed that modernisation has helped tribal communities become more aware of their rights, educational opportunities, and social possibilities outside the settlement. A few participants also reflected that exposure to outside society helped them become more confident and independent in dealing with institutions and public spaces. These narratives demonstrated that participants viewed modernisation as a complex process containing both opportunities and challenges within community life.

Interestingly, some respondents suggested that modern technology itself could be used as a tool for preserving indigenous culture and knowledge systems. Participants proposed the use of videos, digital documentation, mobile applications, games, and online platforms to record traditional practices, medicinal knowledge, songs, stories, and indigenous language for future generations. One participant explained that younger children may become more interested in learning traditional knowledge if such content is presented through digital methods that connect with their present lifestyle and interests. Such perspectives reflected attempts by community members to negotiate between modernisation and cultural preservation rather than viewing them as completely opposing forces.

Another important concern emerging from the interviews was the fear that rapid modernisation may gradually normalise cultural forgetting among younger generations. Several respondents explained that many children today possess limited knowledge regarding traditional rituals, indigenous stories, forest routes, medicinal plants, and community history compared to earlier generations. Some participants worried that if these transformations continue without preservation efforts, future generations may become emotionally and culturally disconnected from their indigenous roots despite continuing to identify themselves as members of the community. According to one interviewee, modernisation should not result in complete abandonment of indigenous identity and cultural memory.

The findings of the present study therefore indicate that modernisation has significantly transformed the lifestyle patterns, social relationships, learning environments, and cultural practices of tribal communities in Nilambur. While educational exposure, technology, and changing economic opportunities have created new possibilities for younger generations, they have also contributed to reduced participation in traditional community life and indigenous practices. The experiences shared by respondents reveal that modernisation within tribal communities is not experienced simply as progress or loss alone, but as a complex process involving adaptation, negotiation, aspiration, and cultural transition within contemporary social realities.

The Indigenous Knowledge Perspective suggests that rapid modernisation and changing lifestyles may influence the transmission of indigenous knowledge, traditional practices, and cultural values across generations (Battiste, 2013). At the same time, the Culturally Responsive Education Perspective (Gay, 2018) emphasises that educational development should respect learners' cultural backgrounds rather than contribute to cultural loss. The participants' experiences therefore highlight the need to balance educational progress and modernisation with the preservation of indigenous culture, language, and community traditions.

5.3.6 Preservation, Resistance, and Cultural Continuity

Despite experiencing language shift, cultural transition, modernisation, and educational displacement, many participants strongly emphasised the importance of preserving indigenous identity, traditions, language, and knowledge systems within their communities. The interviews revealed that tribal students and community members do not passively accept cultural decline, but instead continuously negotiate ways to protect their cultural roots while adapting to contemporary educational and social realities. Narratives shared by respondents reflected emotional attachment towards indigenous identity and a growing awareness regarding the need for cultural preservation among younger generations.

Several community members explained that preserving indigenous culture is important not only for maintaining traditions, but also for protecting collective identity, dignity, memory, and belonging within the community. Many respondents believed that language, rituals, songs, oral histories, ecological knowledge, and traditional practices form an inseparable part of their indigenous existence. One participant emotionally reflected that if preservation efforts are not undertaken today, future generations may know that such traditions once existed, but they may no longer understand their

meanings or emotional significance. Such concerns revealed the fear of gradual cultural disappearance felt by many participants within the community.

Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of preserving indigenous language as part of cultural continuity. Several respondents believed that younger generations should be encouraged to learn and speak their mother tongue from childhood itself. Some community members explained that language preservation should begin within families, where parents and elders actively communicate with children in the indigenous language rather than depending completely upon Malayalam. One interviewee stated, “If children stop speaking the language, slowly the culture will also disappear.” This reflected the strong relationship participants perceived between language, identity, and cultural survival.

The role of elders in preserving cultural continuity also emerged strongly throughout the interviews. Many respondents explained that elders continue to possess important knowledge regarding medicinal plants, forest ecology, rituals, oral traditions, songs, and traditional lifestyles. However, participants expressed concern that younger generations today spend less time interacting with elders because of schooling, hostel life, mobile phone usage, and changing lifestyle patterns.

Several community members therefore stressed the need for stronger intergenerational interaction where elders can share stories, experiences, and indigenous practices with children and youth within the settlements.

Community learning spaces such as Padanamuri were repeatedly mentioned by respondents as important spaces for cultural education and preservation. Some participants suggested that such spaces could be used to teach indigenous language, songs, rituals, storytelling, forest knowledge, medicinal practices, and community history to younger generations. According to respondents, these forms of learning should occur alongside formal education so that children can remain connected with their cultural identity while pursuing modern educational opportunities. A few interviewees also suggested organising cultural gatherings and community programmes where younger generations can actively participate in traditional activities and interact more closely with elders.

Interestingly, several participants did not view cultural preservation and modernisation as completely opposing forces. Instead, many respondents believed that modern technology and education could also support preservation efforts if used meaningfully. Some community members proposed documenting indigenous language, medicinal knowledge, stories, songs, and rituals through videos, mobile applications, recordings, and digital archives so that future generations could access and learn

such knowledge more easily. One participant explained that younger children today are highly attracted towards digital technology, and therefore cultural learning methods should adapt creatively to changing social realities rather than depending only upon traditional forms of transmission.

The interviews also revealed subtle forms of resistance against cultural erasure within the community. Some respondents explained that despite experiencing discrimination and pressure to adapt to mainstream society, they gradually learned to feel proud of their identity and cultural background. A few participants reflected that educational exposure itself helped them become more aware regarding indigenous rights, cultural dignity, and the importance of preserving their traditions and language. One interviewee explained that earlier she felt hesitant to openly identify herself as belonging to the community, but over time she developed confidence and pride in expressing her identity publicly. Such narratives revealed that educational experiences sometimes also create spaces for cultural awareness and resistance rather than only cultural disconnection.

Several respondents further emphasised that educational institutions should become more culturally inclusive and sensitive towards tribal students. According to participants, schools and hostels should recognise indigenous languages, ecological knowledge systems, and cultural practices within educational spaces rather than treating them as inferior or irrelevant. Some interviewees believed that when tribal students feel respected and culturally accepted within schools, they may become more confident in expressing their identity without shame or hesitation. Participants therefore stressed that meaningful educational inclusion should involve both academic development and protection of indigenous dignity and cultural belonging.

Another important concern expressed by participants was the fear that future generations may become culturally disconnected even while continuing to identify themselves as members of the community.

Some respondents explained that identity should not remain limited only to names or official categories, but must also involve language, memory, traditions, collective practices, and emotional connection with indigenous ways of life. According to them, preserving culture does not mean rejecting education or modernity, but ensuring that younger generations do not completely lose connection with their roots while adapting to changing social realities.

The findings of the present study therefore indicate that preservation and resistance remain important dimensions within the experiences of tribal communities undergoing educational and cultural transition.

Although mainstream education, modernisation, and social adaptation have contributed to visible transformations in language use, lifestyle practices, and indigenous knowledge systems, participants continue to express strong emotional attachment towards their cultural identity and traditions. The narratives reveal that tribal communities are not merely passive recipients of cultural change, but actively attempt to negotiate, protect, and redefine cultural continuity within contemporary society. Thus, preservation efforts within the community reflect both resistance against cultural erasure and attempts to balance educational mobility with indigenous belonging and dignity.

CHAPTER VI: FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS & CONCLUSION

FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS & CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The present chapter summaries the major findings of the study based on the thematic analysis and lived experiences shared by participants belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur. The study explored how mainstream educational systems influence language, identity, emotional wellbeing, indigenous knowledge, cultural participation, and community belonging among tribal students. Through a phenomenological approach, the research attempted to understand the emotional and cultural realities associated with educational transition within tribal communities.

The findings revealed that education among tribal students cannot be understood only in terms of literacy, schooling, or academic achievement. Instead, the educational experiences of participants were deeply connected with broader processes of language shift, emotional separation, identity negotiation, modernisation, and cultural transition. While mainstream education created opportunities for exposure, mobility, confidence, and future aspirations, participants also reflected on experiences of homesickness, discrimination, cultural distancing, weakening mother tongue use, and reduced participation in indigenous practices.

The chapter therefore presents the major findings emerging from the study, followed by suggestions based on the experiences and perspectives shared by participants. The final section concludes the study by reflecting on the broader relationship between education, indigenous identity, and cultural continuity within contemporary tribal life.

6.2 FINDINGS

The present study explored the lived experiences of tribal students belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur in order to understand how mainstream education influences language, identity, emotional wellbeing, indigenous knowledge, and cultural belonging. The findings emerging from the interviews and field interactions revealed that educational experiences among tribal students are deeply connected with broader processes of cultural transition and emotional negotiation within contemporary tribal life. The major findings of the study are presented below.

1. The study found that mainstream education influences not only academic learning but also the emotional, linguistic, and cultural experiences of tribal students. Participants repeatedly

reflected that educational exposure gradually changed their relationship with language, community life, identity, and indigenous cultural practices.

2. A major finding of the study was the visible decline in indigenous mother tongue use among younger generations within both Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities. Many participants explained that children today increasingly communicate in Malayalam rather than their indigenous language, especially after entering schools and hostels. Several respondents stated that even parents intentionally encourage Malayalam communication because they believe it helps children adjust better within mainstream society and educational institutions.
3. The findings revealed that fear of discrimination and social shame plays an important role in language shift and identity hesitation among tribal students. Some participants explained that speaking their mother tongue publicly or openly identifying themselves as members of tribal communities sometimes resulted in ridicule, stereotyping, or emotional discomfort within educational and social spaces.
4. The study found that hostel life creates both educational opportunity and emotional-cultural separation among tribal students. While residential schooling helped several participants continue their education and develop confidence, many students also experienced homesickness, loneliness, emotional restriction, and longing for settlement life during their hostel years.
5. Another important finding was that prolonged separation from settlements through hostel education reduced opportunities for interaction with elders, participation in rituals, storytelling, forest visits, and everyday cultural learning practices. Many participants believed that younger generations today possess less practical knowledge regarding indigenous traditions and ecological practices compared to earlier generations.
6. The findings showed that indigenous knowledge within the community was traditionally learned through observation, participation, and close interaction with elders and nature rather than through formal teaching methods. Earlier generations learned about medicinal plants, forest routes, honey collection, food systems, and survival practices naturally as part of everyday life within the settlement.
7. The study revealed that modernisation, changing lifestyle practices, digital technology, and educational transition have gradually reduced younger generations' interaction with forests and traditional community activities. Several participants observed that children today spend more time using mobile phones and digital media while showing reduced involvement in indigenous practices and collective settlement life.

8. Another major finding was that language decline and weakening indigenous knowledge systems are closely interconnected. Participants explained that many traditional practices, plant names, stories, rituals, and ecological understandings are deeply embedded within indigenous language and become difficult to preserve when younger generations lose fluency in their mother tongue.
9. The findings indicated that many tribal students experience continuous negotiation between educational mobility and cultural belonging. Participants expressed a desire for education, employment, and social mobility while simultaneously fearing the gradual weakening of language, traditions, and indigenous identity within their communities.
10. The study also found that mainstream educational systems provide limited space for indigenous language, cultural practices, ecological knowledge, and emotional realities within educational environments. Several participants believed that schools and hostel institutions rarely recognise or include indigenous identity meaningfully within educational processes.
11. At the same time, the findings revealed that participants do not completely reject modernisation or formal education. Many respondents acknowledged that education created opportunities for awareness, confidence, communication skills, employment aspirations, and exposure to outside society. However, participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of balancing educational progress with cultural continuity and indigenous dignity.
12. The study further found that many participants strongly value the preservation of indigenous language, traditions, ecological knowledge, oral histories, and collective memory within the community. Several respondents expressed concern that future generations may become culturally disconnected if preservation efforts are not strengthened within families, settlements, and educational spaces.
13. Another important finding emerging from the study was that tribal communities are not passive recipients of cultural change. Participants actively reflected on ways to preserve language, rituals, stories, and indigenous knowledge through interaction with elders, community learning spaces such as Padanamuri, cultural activities, and digital documentation methods.

6.3 SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings and lived experiences shared by participants, the following suggestions are proposed in order to support culturally sensitive and inclusive educational practices among tribal communities in Nilambur.

1. Educational institutions should create culturally inclusive learning environments where tribal students can express their indigenous identity, language, and cultural background without fear of shame, discrimination, or social exclusion. Schools and hostels should recognise indigenous culture as valuable rather than treating it as inferior or irrelevant within educational spaces.
2. Indigenous mother tongue languages should be encouraged and preserved within both family and educational environments. Parents, elders, schools, and community members should actively support younger generations in learning and speaking their indigenous language in everyday life. Language preservation programmes, storytelling sessions, and informal language-learning activities may help strengthen cultural continuity among children and youth.
3. Community learning spaces such as Padanamuri should be strengthened and utilised for cultural education and intergenerational learning. Such spaces can help younger generations learn indigenous language, oral traditions, songs, ecological knowledge, medicinal practices, rituals, and community history through interaction with elders and community members.
4. Schools and hostel institutions should provide emotionally supportive environments for tribal students, especially during the initial stages of hostel life. Emotional counselling, culturally sensitive mentoring, and regular interaction with family and community members may help reduce feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and emotional isolation among students.
5. Educational institutions should create opportunities for tribal students to remain connected with their community and cultural practices even while pursuing formal education. Cultural programmes, traditional knowledge workshops, settlement visits, and interaction with elders may help reduce emotional and cultural disconnection among hostel students.
6. Indigenous ecological knowledge related to forests, medicinal plants, food systems, honey collection, agriculture, and traditional practices should be documented and preserved systematically before such knowledge disappears with older generations.

7. Community participation should be ensured during documentation processes in order to preserve authenticity and cultural ownership.
8. Greater importance should be given to indigenous knowledge systems within educational and community spaces. Educational approaches should recognise that learning does not occur only through textbooks and examinations, but also through observation, participation, storytelling, and interaction with nature and community life.
9. Awareness programmes should be conducted within schools and wider society to reduce stereotypes, discrimination, and social stigma associated with tribal identity. Creating respectful and inclusive social environments may help tribal students develop confidence and openly express their identity without hesitation or shame.
10. Digital technology and media may be used creatively for cultural preservation and educational support. Videos, recordings, digital archives, mobile applications, and storytelling platforms can help younger generations learn indigenous language, songs, ecological knowledge, and community traditions in ways that connect with their present interests and lifestyle.
11. Educational policies and tribal welfare programmes should focus not only on literacy and educational access, but also on protecting emotional wellbeing, cultural dignity, language preservation, and indigenous belonging among tribal students. Educational inclusion should therefore involve both academic development and cultural sensitivity within institutional environments.
12. Further qualitative and community-based research should be encouraged on indigenous education, language preservation, emotional wellbeing, and cultural transition among tribal communities, particularly among smaller and vulnerable tribal groups whose lived experiences remain underrepresented within academic research.

6.4 CONCLUSION

The present study explored the lived experiences of tribal students belonging to the Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities in Nilambur in order to understand how mainstream education influence's indigenous identity, language, emotional wellbeing, cultural continuity, and community belonging. Through a phenomenological approach, the study attempted to move beyond statistical understandings of tribal education and instead focus on the emotional realities, everyday experiences, and cultural transformations experienced by tribal students within contemporary educational environments.

The narratives shared by participants revealed that education among tribal communities cannot be understood merely as a process of literacy, schooling, or academic achievement. Rather, it is deeply connected with identity, language, emotional attachment, social acceptance, intergenerational relationships, and indigenous ways of life.

One of the most important insights emerging from the study is that mainstream education simultaneously functions as both an opportunity and a source of emotional-cultural tension within tribal life. Many participants acknowledged that education created exposure, confidence, communication skills, awareness, employment aspirations, and opportunities for social mobility. Several respondents explained that educational exposure helped them interact more confidently with wider society and imagine futures beyond traditional limitations. At the same time, the study also revealed that educational systems often operate through dominant cultural and linguistic structures that provide limited recognition to indigenous identity, ecological knowledge, and community-based learning practices. As tribal students increasingly adapt to institutional educational environments, many gradually experience forms of emotional and cultural distancing from their traditional surroundings and indigenous roots.

The study strongly revealed the gradual decline of indigenous mother tongue languages among younger generations within both Cholanayikkan and Kattunayakan communities. Participants repeatedly reflected that younger children today increasingly communicate in Malayalam rather than in their indigenous language, particularly after entering schools and hostels. In several cases, parents themselves encouraged Malayalam communication because they believed it would help children avoid discrimination and adjust more easily within mainstream society. However, participants also expressed deep emotional concern regarding the long-term consequences of language loss. One respondent emotionally reflected that if preservation efforts are not undertaken today, future generations may only say that “there was once a language like this,” without being able to speak or understand it. Such reflections revealed that language loss was experienced not simply as a linguistic transformation, but as a weakening of cultural memory, identity, belonging, and intergenerational continuity within the community.

The findings also highlighted the emotional realities associated with hostel life and residential schooling among tribal students. Although hostel education created opportunities for continuing education, many participants described experiences of homesickness, loneliness, emotional restriction, and separation from family and settlement life during childhood. One participant reflected, “We waited for holidays so we could go back home and stay with our family.”

Such experiences demonstrated that educational mobility often involved emotional separation from spaces associated with comfort, belonging, and cultural familiarity. The study further showed that prolonged hostel life reduced opportunities for interaction with elders, participation in rituals, forest visits, storytelling, and everyday community learning practices. As a result, many participants believed that younger generations today possess less practical knowledge regarding indigenous traditions and ecological systems compared to earlier generations.

Another important finding emerging from the study was the gradual transformation of indigenous knowledge systems under the influence of modernisation, educational transition, and changing lifestyle practices. Participants explained that earlier generations learned through observation, participation, storytelling, and direct interaction with forests and elders. Traditional knowledge regarding medicinal plants, honey collection, food gathering, forest routes, rituals, and survival practices was once naturally transmitted as part of everyday life within the settlement. However, many respondents expressed concern that younger generations today spend more time within schools, hostels, digital spaces, and outside social environments while showing reduced interaction with forests and indigenous practices. One participant reflected, “Now children know mobile phones better than the forest.” This statement symbolically captured the broader transformation taking place within community life, where technological exposure and modern lifestyles increasingly shape childhood experiences and learning environments.

The study further revealed that tribal students continuously negotiate between educational mobility and indigenous belonging. Many participants expressed the desire for education, employment, and improved living conditions while simultaneously fearing the weakening of language, traditions, and cultural identity within the community. Several respondents described experiences of hesitation, inferiority, or discomfort within mainstream educational spaces because of stereotypes associated with tribal identity. Some participants initially avoided openly expressing their identity because of fear of ridicule or social judgement. However, the findings also revealed that educational exposure sometimes helped participants gradually develop confidence and pride regarding their identity. Such experiences demonstrated that identity negotiation among tribal students is complex, emotional, and continuously shaped through interaction with educational institutions and wider society.

An important contribution of the present study is that it highlights tribal communities not as passive victims of modernisation and cultural change, but as communities actively attempting to negotiate continuity and preservation within changing realities.

Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of protecting indigenous language, oral traditions, rituals, ecological knowledge, and collective memory for future generations. Several respondents suggested strengthening community learning spaces such as Padanamuri, encouraging interaction between elders and children, documenting indigenous knowledge systems, and using digital technology creatively for preservation efforts. Participants therefore did not reject education or modernisation completely. Instead, they repeatedly emphasised the importance of balancing educational progress with cultural continuity and indigenous dignity.

The concept of educational displacement explored in the present study therefore extends beyond physical movement from settlements to schools and hostels. The findings revealed that educational displacement also involves emotional separation from community life, weakening intergenerational interaction, language shift, cultural transition, identity negotiation, and gradual distancing from indigenous ecological knowledge systems. The experiences shared by participants demonstrated that educational inclusion without cultural inclusion may contribute to subtle forms of cultural disconnection within indigenous communities. At the same time, the study also revealed resilience, adaptation, and emotional attachment towards indigenous identity among many participants despite ongoing transformations.

The present study finally concludes that education and indigenous cultural continuity should not be treated as opposing forces. Tribal students should not be placed in situations where educational mobility requires emotional distancing from language, identity, and community belonging. Meaningful educational inclusion must therefore move beyond literacy and institutional access alone and include emotional wellbeing, cultural sensitivity, indigenous language preservation, ecological knowledge recognition, and respect for indigenous dignity within educational environments. Only through such culturally inclusive approaches can education become a process that supports both social mobility and cultural continuity among tribal communities in contemporary society. The future of indigenous communities therefore depends not only on educational inclusion, but also on the preservation of the language, memory, dignity, and cultural roots that continue to shape their collective existence.

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ANNEXURE 1: INTERVIEW GUIDE

GENERAL RESEARCH QUESTION:

How do students from tribal community in Kerala experience educational displacement and cultural disconnection, and what changes do they expect for making education more inclusive and culturally sensitive?

SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTION:

1. How do students from tribal community describe their schooling experiences and the influence of schooling on their personal and cultural identity?
 - 1.1. First school experience
 - 1.2. Transition from community to school
 - 1.3. Medium of instruction
 - 1.4. Teacher attitudes and behavior
 - 1.5. Classroom inclusion/exclusion
 - 1.6. Cultural pride or shame
 - 1.7. Identity change through schooling
2. What challenges do students from tribal community face in reintegrating into their indigenous communities after completing or leaving school?
 - 2.1. Return to community after school
 - 2.2. Acceptance by family and elders
 - 2.3. Feeling of belonging
 - 2.4. Loss of traditional skills
 - 2.5. Identity confusion
 - 2.6. “In-between” experiences
3. How does mainstream schooling affect the preservation of indigenous language, ecological knowledge, and cultural practices?
 - 3.1. Mother tongue use
 - 3.2. Language shift
 - 3.3. Loss of indigenous knowledge
 - 3.4. Forest and ecological knowledge
 - 3.5. Cultural practices and rituals

- 3.6. Intergenerational knowledge transfer
- 3.7. Food habit
- 3.8. Traditional games
- 3.9. life in the forest and life in the hostel
- 4. What reforms do students from tribal community and their communities suggest for designing a more inclusive and empowering curriculum?
 - 4.1. Mother-tongue education
 - 4.2. Role of elders and community
 - 4.3. Culturally relevant curriculum
 - 4.4. Indigenous knowledge in textbooks
 - 4.5. Teacher sensitivity
 - 4.6. Student-suggested reforms

ANNESURE 2: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. How do students from tribal community describe their schooling experiences and the influence of schooling on their personal and cultural identity?
 - 1.1. Observed behavior changes
 - 1.2. Language shift in children
 - 1.3. Cultural distancing
 - 1.4. School adjustment issues
 - 1.5. Emotional stress
2. What challenges do students from tribal community face in reintegrating into their indigenous communities after completing or leaving school?
 - 2.1. Community acceptance
 - 2.2. Changed roles of educated youth
 - 2.3. Generational gaps
 - 2.4. Loss of traditional skills
 - 2.5. Identity conflict
3. How does mainstream schooling affect the preservation of indigenous language, ecological knowledge, and cultural practices?
 - 3.1. Mother tongue decline
 - 3.2. Knowledge erosion
 - 3.3. Reduced cultural participation
 - 3.4. Influence on oral traditions
 - 3.5. Community concern
4. What reforms do students from tribal community and their communities suggest for designing a more inclusive and empowering curriculum?
 - 4.1. Community-based schooling
 - 4.2. Role of elders
 - 4.3. Language-inclusive education
 - 4.4. Curriculum reform needs
 - 4.5. Policy and institutional gaps