



## GHOTUL: AN INDIGENOUS MODEL OF COMMUNITY-BASED EDUCATION IN CENTRAL INDIAN TRIBAL SOCIETY

**Rajat Vinayak Irpate**

Research Scholar  
Department of Sociology  
Rashtrasant Tuadoji Maharaj Nagpur University  
Email ID: rajatirpate@gmail.com

**Dr. Ashok Borkar**

Head Department of Sociology  
Rashtrasant Tuadoji Maharaj Nagpur University  
Email ID: a.t\_borkar@yahoo.com

### Abstract

The Ghotul is a traditional institution among the Muria and Gond tribes of Central India that has historically functioned as a community-based system of education and socialization. Commonly described as a youth dormitory, the Ghotul in fact represents a complex socio-educational space where learning is embedded in collective living, cultural participation, moral regulation, and youth governance. This paper examines the Ghotul as an indigenous institution that teaches discipline, labour ethics, service to the community, and cultural pride through experiential and participatory practices.

Drawing upon Indigenous Knowledge Systems and sociological theories of socialization, the study situates the Ghotul as a structured learning environment that transmits values and norms without formal curricula, examinations, or professional teachers. Education within the Ghotul occurs through peer leadership, shared labour, ritual involvement, artistic expression, and regulated social interaction. Particular attention is paid to the institution's approach to sexual socialization, which integrates freedom with responsibility through community oversight and moral accountability.

The paper also addresses contemporary challenges faced by the Ghotul, including the expansion of formal schooling, administrative intervention, and changing aspirations among tribal youth. Rather than viewing the Ghotul as a declining relic, the study argues for its recognition as a living pedagogical system with relevance for contemporary debates on culturally responsive and community-based education. By foregrounding indigenous perspectives alongside sociological analysis, the paper contributes to broader discussions on alternative educational models rooted in social cohesion and cultural continuity.

**Keywords:** Ghotul; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Community-Based Education; Tribal Socialization; Muria and Gond Tribes; Informal Learning; Cultural Pedagogy

### 1. Introduction

Education is often conceptualized in contemporary discourse as a formal process conducted through schools, standardized curricular, and examination systems. Such a view, while dominant, represents only one historically specific model of learning. Across indigenous societies, education has traditionally been embedded in everyday social life, transmitted through participation, observation, and moral engagement rather than through institutional instruction. Among the Muria and Gond tribes of Central India, the Ghotul system exemplifies this alternative pedagogical tradition.

The Ghotul is frequently described as a youth dormitory for unmarried boys and girls. However, this characterization inadequately captures its social and educational significance. In indigenous understanding, the Ghotul is a sacred socio-educational institution where young members, generally between the ages of seven and twenty-five, are initiated into collective values, ethical conduct, labour responsibility, and cultural identity. Oral traditions attribute the origin of the Ghotul to Pahandi Pari Kubar Lingo, the revered ancestral figure of the Gond people, who is believed to have established the institution as a foundation for moral and social education (Elwin, 1947).

Anthropological scholars have long recognized the centrality of the Ghotul in Muria and Gond society. Verrier Elwin described it as a "living university," emphasizing that although it lacks books and formal instruction, it offers a systematic education for life (Elwin, 1947). In *The Kingdom of the Young*, Elwin further noted that the Ghotul nurtures discipline, creativity, and collective responsibility through shared living and cultural participation (Elwin, 1968). Early academic engagement with Elwin's work, including Hutton's review in *Nature*, acknowledged the Ghotul as a serious social institution rather than a marginal cultural curiosity (Hutton, 1949).



From a sociological perspective, the Ghotul can be understood as a mechanism of socialization that sustains moral order and collective consciousness. Émile Durkheim conceptualized education as the means through which society reproduces its moral values in the younger generation. Although developed in the context of modern societies, this insight is particularly relevant to the Ghotul. Through ritual participation, collective labour, and peer regulation, the institution facilitates the internalization of norms without relying on external authority or coercive control.

Unlike formal educational institutions, the Ghotul operates as an autonomous youth space, often described by community members as a “youth republic.” Leadership roles such as Sirdar and Belosa, along with a range of functional positions, allow young members to experience governance, responsibility, and conflict resolution at an early age. Discipline within the Ghotul is maintained through corrective and restorative measures rather than punitive exclusion. Minor issues are resolved internally, while serious matters involve village elders, reflecting a layered system of moral regulation rooted in consensus and accountability.

Labour and service constitute essential components of learning within the Ghotul. Participation in agricultural cooperation, festival organization, and life-cycle rituals is considered a moral duty of Ghotul members. Through such engagement, youth learn that work is not merely an economic necessity but a contribution to collective well-being. Majumdar (1935) observed that tribal institutions emphasize cooperation and endurance precisely because social survival depends on collective effort.

The Ghotul also challenges dominant assumptions regarding sexuality and morality. While allowing regulated interaction between unmarried young men and women, sexual conduct within the Ghotul is governed by social norms, peer oversight, and moral restraint. Elwin noted that such systems historically functioned without producing social disorder or exploitation (Elwin, 1947, 1968). This suggests that moral regulation need not depend solely on repression, but can be cultivated through social responsibility and collective ethics.

In recent years, the Ghotul has gained renewed relevance within debates on Indigenous Knowledge Systems and community-based education. Scholars have emphasized that learning systems rooted in cultural context and social participation offer important insights for inclusive educational frameworks (Kothari et al., 2003; Moitra, 2024). However, modernization, formal schooling, and administrative interventions have weakened the functional role of the Ghotul in many regions, often without recognizing its educational value.

Against this background, the present study examines the Ghotul as a socio-educational institution in Central Indian tribal society. By integrating indigenous perspectives with sociological analysis, the paper seeks to demonstrate how the Ghotul teaches discipline, labour ethics, service, and cultural pride through participatory and morally grounded practices.

## 2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

To examine the Ghotul as a socio-educational institution, it is necessary to move beyond descriptive accounts and situate the institution within a coherent conceptual framework. This study draws upon three interrelated perspectives: Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), sociological theories of socialization and moral regulation, and approaches to informal and community-based education. Together, these perspectives allow the Ghotul to be understood as a structured learning system grounded in collective life rather than as an informal or incidental social space.

Indigenous Knowledge Systems emphasize the production and transmission of knowledge through lived practice, oral tradition, ritual participation, and social interaction. Within such systems, learning is not separated from daily life, nor is it confined to specialized institutions. The Ghotul exemplifies this epistemological orientation. Knowledge within the Ghotul is embedded in shared labour, cultural performance, ethical conduct, and peer governance. Rather than prioritizing abstract instruction or individual achievement, the institution fosters collective competence and moral responsibility. As Kothari, Chand, and Norton (2003) argue, traditional learning systems in India often operate beyond literacy, privileging meaning, context, and social relevance over formalized pedagogy.

The sacred foundation of the Ghotul further strengthens its pedagogical authority. Indigenous narratives attribute its origin to Pahandi Pari Kubar Lingo, whose teachings are believed to have laid the moral foundations of Gond society. This sacred association frames education as a cultural duty rather than a personal choice. Learning within the Ghotul is therefore inseparable from identity

formation and cultural continuity, aligning with broader IKS principles that treat knowledge as collectively owned and ethically bound.

From a sociological standpoint, the Ghotul can be analyzed as an institution of socialization and moral regulation. Émile Durkheim conceptualized education as the process through which society transmits its norms, values, and collective conscience to the younger generation. While Durkheim's framework emerged from the study of modern societies, its core insight is applicable to indigenous contexts. In the Ghotul, moral norms are internalized through participation in shared routines, collective decision-making, and peer accountability rather than through external authority.

The institution's internal governance structure reinforces this process. Youth leadership roles and functional responsibilities introduce members to authority as a moral obligation rather than a coercive force. Discipline is corrective and restorative, designed to reintegrate individuals into the collective rather than exclude them. Majumdar (1935) noted that such mechanisms are characteristic of tribal institutions, where cohesion depends on consensus and mutual obligation rather than formal law.

The Ghotul also aligns closely with contemporary understandings of informal and community-based education. Informal education theory emphasizes learning through observation, mentorship, and practice, often occurring outside formal institutions. In the Ghotul, senior youth act as guides for younger members, transmitting cultural knowledge, behavioural norms, and work ethics through everyday interaction. There is no rigid separation between teacher and learner; instead, roles shift according to experience and context. Hasnain (1992) observed that such fluid learning environments are particularly effective in tribal societies, where education is closely linked to survival, cooperation, and social harmony.

Recent scholars on indigenous education have further underscored the relevance of such systems. Studies on indigenous agency in education highlight the importance of recognizing traditional institutions as pedagogically valid rather than culturally residual (Moitra, 2024). Within this framework, the Ghotul emerges as an alternative educational model that integrates cognitive, moral, emotional, and social learning.

By synthesizing Indigenous Knowledge Systems, sociological theories of socialization, and informal education perspectives, this framework positions the Ghotul as a coherent socio-educational institution. It provides the analytical foundation for examining how discipline, labour ethics, service, and cultural pride are cultivated through participatory practices embedded in community life.

### **3. Ghotul as a Community-Based Learning Space**

The Ghotul operates as a distinctive form of community-based learning in which education is embedded within collective living and social participation. Unlike formal institutions that separate learning from everyday life, the Ghotul integrates instruction, moral regulation, and cultural practice into a single social space. Learning here is not episodic or classroom-bound; it is continuous, relational, and deeply contextual.

Entry into the Ghotul marks a significant transition in the life course of Muria and Gond youth. From this stage onward, young members are gradually introduced to responsibilities that extend beyond the family unit and toward the wider community. Discipline, cleanliness, cooperation, and respect for elders are learned not through abstract rules but through daily routines and shared obligations. Maintaining the Ghotul space, adhering to collective norms, and participating in communal activities constitute practical lessons in social responsibility.

A defining feature of the Ghotul as a learning space is its autonomy. Often conceptualized by community members as a "youth republic," the Ghotul is largely governed by its own members under the guidance of senior youth leaders. This internal governance structure allows young people to experience authority, accountability, and decision-making within a supportive environment. Leadership roles and functional responsibilities are distributed among members, ensuring that learning is participatory rather than hierarchical. Through this process, youth acquire practical knowledge of governance, cooperation, and ethical judgment.

Labour ethics are central to the pedagogical role of the Ghotul. Participation in agricultural cooperation, festival preparation, construction work, and ritual service is not optional but morally expected. These activities teach that labour is not merely an economic necessity but a social contribution that sustains collective life. Majumdar (1935) emphasized that such institutions cultivate



endurance and cooperation, qualities essential for survival in ecologically demanding contexts. Within the Ghotul, work is integrated with social recognition, reinforcing its moral value.

Service to the community further strengthens the educational function of the Ghotul. Members play active roles in festivals, weddings, and funerary rites, thereby learning ritual protocols, social roles, and ethical conduct. These experiences foster a sense of belonging and cultural pride, as youth come to see themselves as custodians of collective traditions. Education, in this sense, is inseparable from service and participation.

Discipline within the Ghotul is maintained through collective regulation rather than external enforcement. Rules governing conduct are enforced by youth leaders, with corrective measures aimed at reform rather than punishment. Minor infractions are resolved internally, while more serious matters involve village elders. Hasnain (1992) noted that such systems of internal control are characteristic of tribal social organization, where cohesion is maintained through consensus and moral accountability rather than formal law.

Cultural learning is also integral to the Ghotul's pedagogical structure. Participation in music, dance, storytelling, and craftwork allows youth to embody cultural knowledge rather than merely observe it. These practices function as educational tools through which history, values, and identity are transmitted. Elwin (1968) emphasized that such cultural participation nurtures creativity while reinforcing collective belonging.

As a community-based learning space, the Ghotul challenges dominant assumptions that equate education solely with formal schooling. It demonstrates that effective learning can occur through lived experience, shared responsibility, and moral engagement. While modern education systems provide new opportunities, they often overlook these dimensions of learning. Recognizing the Ghotul as a legitimate educational space is therefore essential for developing inclusive and culturally responsive approaches to education.

#### **4. Youth Governance, Discipline, and Labour Ethics**

A distinctive feature of the Ghotul as a socio-educational institution is its system of youth governance, through which members acquire practical knowledge of authority, responsibility, and collective accountability. Governance within the Ghotul is neither imposed by elders nor modelled on formal bureaucratic systems. Instead, it emerges from within the youth group itself, guided by culturally sanctioned roles and moral expectations.

Leadership positions such as Sirdar and Belosa, supported by a range of functional roles, structure the internal organization of the Ghotul. These positions are not merely honorary; they carry clearly defined responsibilities related to discipline, coordination, and conflict resolution. By occupying these roles, young members learn to exercise authority as a form of service rather than domination. Leadership is evaluated not through command but through the ability to maintain harmony, ensure participation, and uphold collective norms.

Discipline within the Ghotul operates through a restorative framework rather than a punitive one. Deviations from accepted conduct are addressed through corrective measures that aim to reform behavior and reintegrate the individual into the group. Minor lapses are resolved internally by youth leaders, while serious matters invite the involvement of village elders. This graduated approach ensures proportionality and fairness, reinforcing moral responsibility without undermining individual dignity. Such practices reflect a culturally embedded understanding of justice grounded in social balance and reconciliation.

From a sociological perspective, this form of discipline illustrates how moral order is sustained through internalized norms and peer regulation. Émile Durkheim argued that social cohesion depends on the effective transmission of collective values rather than on external coercion alone. In the Ghotul, moral regulation is achieved through shared living, mutual observation, and collective accountability, allowing norms to be internalized through everyday interaction.

Labour ethics constitute another central dimension of learning within the Ghotul. Participation in communal labour—whether in agriculture, festival preparation, construction, or ritual service—is considered a moral obligation of membership. Through these activities, youth learn that work is inseparable from social responsibility. Labour is not valued solely for its economic output but for its contribution to collective well-being and cultural continuity.



Majumdar (1935) observed that tribal institutions emphasize cooperation and endurance because survival in challenging environments depends on collective effort. The Ghotul reinforces this orientation by integrating labour with social recognition and moral approval. Members who fulfill their duties diligently earn respect and symbolic status, while neglect invites corrective intervention. In this way, labour becomes a medium of moral education rather than a burdensome task.

Importantly, governance and labour within the Ghotul are framed within a broader cultural narrative associated with Pahandi Pari Kupar Lingo. Responsibilities are understood as contributions to a sacred heritage rather than obligations imposed by authority. This moral framing enhances commitment and fosters cultural pride, strengthening the legitimacy of the institution among youth.

By combining participatory governance, restorative discipline, and collective labour, the Ghotul functions as a training ground for adult social roles. Youth emerge from this system with a practical understanding of leadership, responsibility, and cooperation—capacities essential for sustaining social cohesion within tribal society.

### **5. Cultural Pedagogy: Music, Body, and Identity**

Cultural pedagogy constitutes a central dimension of learning within the Ghotul, where knowledge is transmitted not only through instruction or regulation but through embodied and expressive practices. Music, dance, bodily discipline, and artistic expression function as pedagogical tools that shape identity, aesthetic sensibility, and collective memory. In this context, culture itself becomes a medium of education.

Music and dance play a particularly significant role in the pedagogical life of the Ghotul. Participation in collective singing and ritual performance is not optional entertainment but an essential component of social learning. Through repeated engagement with songs, rhythms, and movements associated with festivals and ceremonial occasions, youth internalize historical narratives, moral values, and social norms. Mastery of these forms requires discipline, coordination, and attentiveness, reinforcing broader lessons in cooperation and responsibility. Elwin (1968) observed that the creative impulse fostered within the Ghotul encourages young members to take pride in both individual skill and collective achievement.

The body functions as an important site of learning within the Ghotul. Dance practices demand balance, endurance, and control, cultivating bodily awareness alongside social discipline. Such embodied learning aligns with indigenous epistemologies that view knowledge as lived and performed rather than abstract and textual. Through bodily practice, youth learn social boundaries, gendered roles, and expressive restraint, all of which contribute to their social maturity.

Body ornamentation and tattooing (Godna) further illustrate the pedagogical use of the body. Tattoos are not treated as mere decorative marks but as symbolic inscriptions that communicate identity, lineage, protection, and cultural belonging. The process of tattooing, along with the meanings attached to specific motifs, serves as an educational moment in which cultural knowledge is inscribed onto the body itself. Vidyarthi (1977) emphasized that such practices function as visual texts, transmitting collective memory and reinforcing ethnic identity across generations.

Cultural pedagogy within the Ghotul also fosters emotional and social bonding. Collective performance creates shared experiences that strengthen group solidarity and mutual trust. These activities allow for emotional expression within socially sanctioned boundaries, contributing to social harmony. They also serve as informal assessments of learning, as proficiency in cultural practices signals maturity, responsibility, and readiness for adult roles within the community.

From an educational perspective, the Ghotul demonstrates that learning need not be confined to cognitive acquisition alone. By integrating music, movement, and bodily inscription into everyday life, the institution cultivates cognitive, emotional, and physical capacities simultaneously. Kothari, Chand, and Norton (2003) argue that traditional learning systems offer alternative epistemologies that value meaning, context, and relational knowledge. The Ghotul exemplifies this approach by embedding education within cultural practice.

However, the erosion of Ghotul traditions due to modernization and the marginalization of indigenous learning spaces threaten the continuity of this cultural pedagogy. When music, dance, and ritual are detached from everyday learning contexts, they risk becoming symbolic performances rather than lived practices. Recognizing the Ghotul as a site of cultural pedagogy is therefore essential for



understanding how indigenous societies sustain identity and transmit values through embodied learning.

### **6. Sexual Socialization and Regulated Freedom**

One of the most debated aspects of the Ghotul system concerns its approach to sexuality and intimate relationships among youth. External interpretations often mischaracterize this dimension as moral permissiveness or social disorder. Such readings fail to recognize that sexuality within the Ghotul is embedded in a structured moral framework and functions as a component of social education rather than as unregulated behavior.

In the indigenous context, the Ghotul provides a socially sanctioned space where unmarried young men and women interact under collective oversight. These interactions are governed by norms that emphasize consent, restraint, and accountability. Emotional exclusivity, coercion, or disruptive attachment is discouraged, and corrective measures are employed when conduct deviates from accepted standards. Sexual behavior, therefore, is not privatized or detached from social life but integrated into a system of communal regulation.

From a sociological perspective, this arrangement illustrates how moral norms are internalized through participation rather than imposed through prohibition. Émile Durkheim argued that moral order is sustained when individuals absorb collective values through social interaction. In the Ghotul, young members learn the social consequences of intimacy through lived experience, peer observation, and moral accountability. Freedom is permitted, but it is neither absolute nor individualistic.

Verrier Elwin emphasized that despite the openness of pre-marital interaction within the Ghotul, Muria society historically exhibited low levels of sexual exploitation or social conflict (Elwin, 1947; 1968). This empirical observation challenges dominant assumptions that moral order depends solely on repression or segregation. Instead, the Ghotul demonstrates that ethical conduct can be cultivated through trust, collective oversight, and shared values.

Sexual socialization within the Ghotul is closely connected to other forms of learning. Youth are expected to fulfill communal duties related to labour, service, and cultural participation regardless of personal relationships. This integration reinforces the primacy of collective obligations over individual desire. Moreover, the institution establishes clear moral boundaries through life-stage transitions. Marriage marks a decisive shift in status: married individuals are prohibited from participating in Ghotul life, signaling the end of youth socialization and the beginning of adult responsibility and monogamy.

Viewed through the lens of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, the Ghotul's approach to sexuality represents a culturally grounded form of sex education. Rather than focusing on biological instruction alone, it emphasizes emotional maturity, social responsibility, and moral restraint. Such learning occurs implicitly through observation, participation, and correction rather than through formal teaching.

In contemporary contexts, this aspect of the Ghotul has become a source of misunderstanding and administrative intervention. External moral frameworks often judge the institution without acknowledging its internal regulatory mechanisms. As a result, the educational role of the Ghotul in guiding sexual development has been undermined in many regions. Recognizing sexual socialization within the Ghotul as a regulated and ethical process is therefore essential for a balanced understanding of indigenous education systems.

### **7. Contemporary Challenges and Relevance**

The Ghotul system today faces significant challenges. Expansion of formal schooling, administrative intervention, and changing aspirations among tribal youth have weakened its functional role in many regions. Formal education often operates in isolation from indigenous learning spaces, fragmenting holistic education. While these transformations have opened new opportunities, they have also disrupted indigenous systems of learning and socialization.

Administrative suspicion, particularly regarding youth dormitories and sexuality, has led to regulation or closure of Ghotuls in some areas. Such interventions frequently ignore internal regulatory mechanisms and judge the institution through external moral frameworks.

Despite these challenges, the Ghotul retains adaptive potential. Indigenous voices increasingly argue for reimagining it as a community learning hub that preserves cultural heritage while responding to contemporary needs. Scholars on Indigenous Knowledge Systems supports such integration,



emphasizing the value of community-based learning for fostering agency and identity (Kothari et al., 2003; Moitra, 2024).

Recognizing the Ghotul as a socio-educational institution is therefore crucial not only for cultural preservation but also for rethinking education in plural societies. Rather than treating the Ghotul as a relic of the past, policymakers and educators must engage with it as a living pedagogical system. Respectful integration, rather than regulatory suppression, offers a pathway for sustaining indigenous forms of learning alongside formal education.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has examined the Ghotul as a socio-educational institution embedded within the Muria and Gond tribal societies of Central India. Moving beyond reductive portrayals of the Ghotul as a youth dormitory or cultural curiosity, the study has demonstrated that it functions as a structured system of community-based learning. Through participatory governance, collective labour, cultural pedagogy, and regulated social interaction, the Ghotul initiates young members into the moral, social, and cultural foundations of collective life.

By situating the Ghotul within the framework of Indigenous Knowledge Systems, the study highlights an alternative epistemology in which education is inseparable from lived experience. Learning in the Ghotul does not rely on formal curricula or institutional hierarchies; instead, it is embedded in routine practices, shared responsibilities, and ethical regulation. Discipline, labour ethics, and service are cultivated not through abstract instruction but through participation in community life. This pedagogical model challenges dominant assumptions that equate education exclusively with formal schooling and standardized assessment.

The analysis further contributes to sociological understandings of socialization by explicitly engaging with the idea that education is fundamentally a moral process. In this sense, the Ghotul exemplifies how collective norms and values are internalized through peer regulation and shared accountability rather than external coercion. Youth governance within the Ghotul provides early exposure to leadership, responsibility, and restorative forms of discipline, preparing members for adult social roles.

A significant contribution of this study lies in its treatment of sexual socialization. Rather than approaching sexuality through moral panic or exoticization, the paper has shown that intimacy within the Ghotul is governed by socially embedded norms that emphasize consent, restraint, and accountability. This regulated freedom demonstrates that moral order can be achieved through collective oversight and ethical learning, offering important insights for contemporary debates on sex education and youth development.

Finally, the paper has addressed the contemporary challenges faced by the Ghotul, including the expansion of formal education, administrative intervention, and changing aspirations among tribal youth. While these forces have weakened the institution in many regions, the study argues that the Ghotul retains significant adaptive potential. Recognizing it as a living socio-educational system—rather than a declining relic—opens possibilities for culturally responsive educational frameworks that integrate indigenous values with modern needs.

Overall, this study contributes to sociology, tribal studies, and education by offering an analytically grounded, ethically sensitive, and indigenous-centred understanding of the Ghotul. It underscores the importance of engaging seriously with indigenous institutions as sources of pedagogical insight, social cohesion, and cultural continuity.

## References

- Elwin, V. (1947). *The Muria and their Ghotul*. Oxford University Press.
- Elwin, V. (1968). *The Kingdom of the Young*. Oxford University Press.
- Hasnain, N. (1992). *Tribal India*. Palaka Prakashan.
- Hutton, J. H. (1949). *The Muria and their Ghetul* [Review of *The Muria and Their Ghotul* by V. Elwin]. *Nature*, 164, 249–250. <https://doi.org/10.1038/164249a0>
- Kothari, B., Chand, V. S., & Norton, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Reading beyond the alphabet*. Sage Publications.
- Majumdar, D. N. (1935). *Tribes in transition: A study in culture pattern*. Longmans, Green and Co.
- Moitra, N. (2024). Participation, assertion and aspiration: Indigenous teacher agency in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 29(7), 1813–1831.