

From Circumscription to Compromise: A Socio-Cognitive Review of Career Aspirations among Tribal Youth in Northeast India

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ABSTRACT

Career aspirations among tribal youth cannot be understood solely as individual preferences or personal ambitions. They are shaped by the social, cultural, educational, institutional and economic conditions through which young people imagine, evaluate, narrow and revise future possibilities. This paper presents a concept-led integrative review of literature on career aspirations among tribal youth in Northeast India through the combined lens of Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise and Social Cognitive Career Theory. Drawing on theoretical, empirical, review-based and policy-oriented literature, the review examines how family and community contexts, gender norms, educational access, career guidance, labour-market exposure, self-efficacy, outcome expectations and perceived barriers influence aspiration formation and career decision-making. The paper argues that aspirations are socially situated and socio-cognitively mediated processes shaped by both agency and constraint. It advances two analytical ideas. First, bounded career imagination explains how limited exposure, weak guidance, restricted role models, uneven institutional access and uncertain labour-market information may narrow the careers students perceive as visible, legitimate and attainable. Second, the paper distinguishes adaptive compromise, where students revise goals through informed planning, from constrained compromise, where aspirations are lowered, delayed or redirected because of structural or institutional barriers. The review suggests that expanding career horizons may require culturally responsive counselling, stronger school-to-work information systems, credible vocational and higher-education pathways, improved labour-market awareness and regionally grounded policy interventions that connect aspiration with locally accessible educational routes and support systems in practice and policy.

Keywords: Career aspirations, Tribal youth, Northeast India, Bounded career imagination, Social Cognitive Career Theory

INTRODUCTION

Career aspirations and social inequality among tribal youth

Career aspirations emerge within everyday social life. Family expectations, community norms, schooling and institutional access influence how young people learn about work, judge future options and decide which routes are worth pursuing. Although aspirations are often expressed as personal goals, they depend on the resources through which educational and occupational futures become imaginable and actionable (Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2006).

For tribal youth, aspirations must be read alongside unequal opportunity structures. Students may seek higher education, secure employment, public service, entrepreneurship, or meaningful work but their plans depend on the quality of schooling, household resources, financial support, access to higher education, and institutional availability (Marchang, 2020; Narzary et al., 2023). District-level development conditions also frame opportunity in Northeast India (NITI Aayog et al., 2025). Seemingly modest aspirations may therefore reflect limited information, weak support or uncertainty about feasible routes rather than lack of ambition.

This paper treats aspiration formation as a process of exposure, evaluation and recalibration. Young people encounter possible futures through family, school, peers, teachers, media, local role models, community expectations and visible employment. They then weigh these possibilities against respectability, gender expectations, cultural belonging, educational requirements, cost, distance, family responsibility and expected returns. Inequality therefore enters early, shaping which futures are considered before formal career decisions are made.

Tribal youth and the Northeast India

Northeast India is socially, culturally, linguistically and institutionally diverse. Tribal communities differ in livelihood systems, land relations, educational experiences and economic conditions (Marchang, 2018, 2019, 2020). The category tribal youth is therefore used cautiously: it signals a shared analytical focus, not a uniform experience. Career aspirations must be read through the family, community, educational and regional contexts in which they take shape.

The term tribal youth is used here as an analytical category, not as a claim of uniform experience. Young people from different tribal communities may face different opportunities and constraints depending on location, household resources, school quality, higher-education access, transport, digital access, language support, career exposure, guidance and local labour-market conditions. Even within the same region, students may differ by gender, rural or urban location, family education, economic background and proximity to colleges, vocational centers or employment networks.

For many tribal students in Northeast India, expanding opportunities coexist with persistent constraints. Schooling, higher education, vocational training, digital platforms, public employment, entrepreneurship and skill initiatives can widen awareness of future options. Yet distance, uneven institutional access, financial pressure and higher-education constraints may still restrict movement from aspiration to action (Marchang, 2020; Narzary et al., 2023). District-level development patterns provide the wider opportunity context (NITI Aayog et al., 2025). Tribal identity should not be framed as a barrier; it can also provide belonging, pride, responsibility and motivation.

Career choice as a socially and psychologically mediated process

Career choice is often discussed through interest, aptitude, motivation or individual decision-making. These factors matter but they are not sufficient for understanding career aspirations among tribal youth in Northeast India. Young people interpret possible futures through family expectations, community values, school experiences, gender norms, economic conditions, institutional access, labour-market information and beliefs about capability and success.

A socially informed approach helps explain how social contacts shape the visibility, accessibility and restrictions of career options. Family background may influence occupational exposure, financial support, educational expectations and familiarity with higher education (Archer et al., 2012). Schools, colleges, community expectations and regional conditions may shape academic confidence, subject exposure, career awareness, access to guidance, occupational respectability and practical reachability.

A psychological and socio-cognitive understanding is also necessary because students interpret opportunities and barriers through self-efficacy, outcome expectations, perceived risk, family responsibility and personal

goals. A student may know about a career but avoid it if the pathway appears too expensive, distant, competitive, unsupported or uncertain. Another may revise a goal after receiving better information, encouragement or exposure to an alternative route. Career choice therefore involves interpretation, not merely access.

This understanding leads to the integrated theoretical framework used in the paper. Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise explains how young people narrow occupational options according to perceived accessibility, prestige, gender suitability, social acceptability and self-concept (Gottfredson, 1981, 2002). Social Cognitive Career Theory explains how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, personal goals, contextual supports and perceived barriers influence career interests, choices and persistence (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 1994, 2000). Together, these perspectives frame how aspirations are formed, narrowed and revised.

Research gap

Existing studies discuss tribal education, higher education, livelihood change, vocational participation, youth aspirations and regional development in India and Northeast India (Biswal et al., 2025; Marchang, 2020; Narzary et al., 2023; Ningthoujam et al., 2021; Pandey & Kakati, 2022). What remains less developed is a career-development account of how tribal youth in Northeast India imagine, narrow and revise career possibilities under unequal educational and institutional conditions.

The first gap is theoretical. Gottfredson's theory explains how perceived accessibility, prestige, gender suitability and self-concept narrow occupational possibilities, while Social Cognitive Career Theory explains how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, supports and barriers guide choice and persistence. These perspectives have rarely been combined to examine how tribal youth in Northeast India assess careers within family, community, educational and labour-market settings.

A second gap concerns the tendency of some discussions on marginalized youth aspirations to emphasise either structural explanations or individual motivation. A purely structural account may understate young people's agency, while a purely psychological account may overlook family background, school quality, institutional distance, financial pressure, gendered expectations, labour-market exposure, career guidance and regional opportunity structures. A socio-cognitive framework is therefore needed to hold both dimensions together.

A third gap concerns the interpretation of career adjustment. When young people revise, delay or redirect preferred career goals, this may be read as low aspiration, lack of ambition or weak motivation. In socially and institutionally unequal contexts, however, such adjustment may reflect informed planning or forced narrowing because of structural barriers. The literature therefore needs a clearer distinction between adaptive and constrained forms of compromise.

Aim, scope and contribution of the review

This paper develops a socio-cognitive understanding of career aspirations among tribal youth in Northeast India through an integrative review of theoretical, empirical, review-based and policy-oriented literature. It examines how socio-cultural conditions, institutional structures, psychological processes and regional inequalities shape aspiration formation, career narrowing and career adjustment.

The scope of the paper is conceptual and interpretive. It does not present primary field data, statistical analysis, systematic review or meta-analysis. Instead, it synthesises selected literature across career development theory, sociology of education, tribal studies, youth transition, vocational education, counselling and public policy (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). This approach is useful because the topic cuts across disciplinary boundaries and explores how society influences people's personal understanding and career choices.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it links Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise with Social Cognitive Career Theory to explain aspiration as a product of exposure, evaluation and modulation. Second, it develops bounded career imagination to describe how limited exposure, guidance, role models,

institutional pathways and labour-market information restrict futures that appear knowable, acceptable and reachable. Third, it distinguishes adaptive compromise, based on informed planning, from constrained compromise, produced by structural, educational, economic, gendered or institutional barriers.

The review has implications for culturally responsive counselling, school-to-work information systems, higher-education transition support, vocational credibility, labour-market awareness and regionally sensitive policy implementation. Expanding career horizons among tribal youth requires not only motivation but credible pathways, accessible guidance, institutional support and policy mechanisms that make broader aspirations realistically attainable.

METHODOLOGY OF THE INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

Search strategy and source identification

This paper uses a concept-led integrative review to examine career aspirations among tribal youth in Northeast India through sociological, psychological, educational and policy perspectives. The topic draws on career theory, sociology of education, tribal studies, youth transition, vocational education, counselling, higher education and public policy. Rather than attempting exhaustive database coverage or meta-analysis, the review offers an interpretive synthesis of selected theoretical, empirical, review-based and policy-oriented literature on how aspirations are formed, narrowed, revised and negotiated in unequal contexts (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

The literature was identified through a purposive, concept-led search of academic search engines, journal publisher websites, reference tracing and official institutional websites. Search terms included career aspirations, tribal youth, Scheduled Tribes, Northeast India, career guidance, vocational education, skill development, higher education, youth transition, Social Cognitive Career Theory, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, circumscription, compromise and career decision-making. Foundational theoretical works were included irrespective of year, while recent empirical, review-based and policy-oriented sources were selected for their relevance to contemporary education, vocational pathways and policy.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Sources were included when they contributed directly to career development theory, socio-cognitive career processes, tribal education, youth aspirations, educational inequality, vocational pathways, career guidance, labour-market exposure, regional development in Northeast India or related policy interventions. Policy documents and official reports were included where they provided useful context on education, employment, higher education, skill development, tribal welfare or regional development.

Sources were excluded when they did not address career aspirations, educational access, youth transitions, tribal communities, career decision-making, vocational pathways, regional development or the theoretical concerns of the paper. General youth aspiration literature was not treated as directly applicable to tribal youth in Northeast India unless it offered transferable conceptual insight and was used with caution.

Review focus and analytical procedure

The selected literature was organised through thematic and conceptual synthesis across four domains: socio-cultural conditions, institutional and structural conditions, socio-cognitive processes and career narrowing and adjustment. These domains covered family and community expectations, gender norms, cultural belonging, schooling, higher education, guidance support, vocational exposure, labour-market information, policy support, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, perceived barriers and contextual supports.

Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise was used to interpret how occupational options may be narrowed through perceptions of accessibility, prestige, gender suitability, social acceptability and self-concept (Gottfredson, 1981, 2002). Social Cognitive Career Theory was used to examine how self-efficacy,

outcome expectations, goals, supports and barriers influence career-related interests, choices and persistence (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 1994, 2000). Together, these perspectives guided the analysis of how social conditions shape career horizons and how young people interpret opportunity, risk and constraint.

Conceptual synthesis

The review followed an interpretive rather than statistical or aggregative synthesis process. Literature was compared around recurring concepts such as aspiration formation, career exposure, perceived feasibility, institutional access, family influence, gendered expectations, educational pathways, vocational alternatives, guidance support and labour-market uncertainty. This synthesis contributed to the two analytical ideas: bounded career imagination and the distinction between adaptive compromise and constrained compromise.

Bounded career imagination refers to the range of futures students come to see as knowable, acceptable and reachable when exposure, guidance, role models, institutional access and labour-market information are uneven. Adaptive compromise describes informed adjustment that preserves meaningful futures, while constrained compromise describes the lowering, delaying or redirection of aspirations under structural, educational, economic, gendered or institutional barriers.

Nature and limits of the review

This review is conceptual and interpretive. It does not present primary field data from tribal students, parents, teachers, counsellors or institutions, nor does it claim statistical generalisability or full representation of all tribal youth in Northeast India. The region is socially, culturally, linguistically and institutionally diverse and experiences vary across communities, districts, gender positions, educational settings and livelihood contexts. The review therefore uses cautious, context-sensitive interpretation rather than universal claims.

The methodological aim is to generate conceptual insight, identify gaps and propose a socio-cognitive framework for understanding career aspirations among tribal youth in Northeast India. This approach is consistent with integrative review methodology, where existing literature is used to clarify concepts, connect fragmented bodies of scholarship, develop theoretical understanding and suggest directions for future empirical research (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016; Whitemore & Knafl, 2005).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This review is guided by an integrated socio-cognitive framework that brings together Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise and Social Cognitive Career Theory. These perspectives are used together because career aspirations among tribal youth in Northeast India require attention to both personal evaluation and unequal social conditions. Aspirations are shaped through the interaction of social exposure, cultural expectations, institutional access, self-belief, perceived feasibility and available pathways.

Gottfredson's theory provides a useful lens for understanding how career possibilities are narrowed. Circumscription refers to the process through which young people eliminate options inconsistent with self-concept, gender expectations, social prestige, cultural acceptability or perceived accessibility (Gottfredson, 1981, 2002). Compromise refers to adjustment of preferred goals when desired options appear difficult to pursue or sustain. For tribal youth in Northeast India, these processes help explain why some careers may appear desirable but distant, while others seem more realistic because of family expectations, community recognition, local employment patterns, educational access, gendered mobility concerns or financial constraints.

Social Cognitive Career Theory explains career development through self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, supports and perceived barriers (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 1994, 2000). Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in the ability to organise and carry out actions required for desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Students may avoid a pathway not because they lack interest but because they doubt their ability to meet academic,

financial, social or institutional demands. Outcome expectations also matter because young people evaluate whether a pathway is likely to produce employment, income, stability, recognition, mobility or fulfilment.

Bringing these theories together allows the review to examine both narrowing and negotiation. Gottfredson's theory explains why some occupational options may be excluded before formal decision-making. SCCT explains how students interpret ability, support, risk and likely outcomes when deciding whether to pursue, revise, delay or abandon a preferred pathway. Together, they show that career aspiration is not a single decision but a developing process shaped by social location and personal evaluation.

The paper uses the following heuristic sequence: social location influences career exposure; exposure affects self-efficacy and outcome expectations; these perceptions shape feasibility judgments; feasibility judgments contribute to circumscription; and circumscription may lead to adaptive or constrained compromise. This is not proposed as a causal model but as an interpretive framework for linking social conditions with students' evaluations of possibility.

This framework advances the two analytical ideas. The first is bounded career imagination, which refers to the restricted range of futures students perceive as visible, legitimate and attainable when exposure, guidance, role models, institutional pathways and labour-market information are limited. The concept does not imply lack of ambition among tribal youth. Rather, it explains how ambition is shaped by the resources through which young people learn what futures are possible and how they may be pursued.

The second analytical idea is the distinction between adaptive compromise and constrained compromise. Adaptive compromise occurs when young people revise career plans through informed decision-making, knowledge of alternatives and realistic planning. Constrained compromise occurs when aspirations are lowered, delayed or redirected because of barriers such as poverty, weak schooling, lack of counselling, geographic isolation, gendered restrictions, limited institutional access or uncertain employment outcomes. This distinction helps prevent career adjustment from being misread as lack of motivation and shows where support systems need to widen available choices.

The practical significance of the framework is that counselling and policy must address imagination and feasibility. If aspirations are narrowed by limited exposure and weak support, students need reliable information, self-efficacy, educational and vocational pathways, labour-market awareness and support in distinguishing realistic adjustment from avoidable constraint.

Conceptual contribution of the integrated framework

The integrated framework allows this review to move beyond a general discussion of career aspirations. It explains how career possibilities are socially encountered, cognitively evaluated, gradually narrowed and eventually revised. Within this framework, aspirations are neither treated simply as personal dreams nor reduced to structural disadvantage.

This paper advances two related analytical ideas. First, bounded career imagination explains how limited exposure, weak guidance, restricted role models, uneven institutional access and uncertain labour-market information may restrict the careers students perceive as visible, legitimate and attainable. Second, the distinction between adaptive compromise and constrained compromise clarifies that career adjustment may reflect either informed planning or forced narrowing.

Table 1. Adaptive compromise and constrained compromise

Dimension	Adaptive compromise	Constrained compromise
Nature of adjustment	Informed revision of career goals after considering realistic and meaningful alternatives	Lowering, delaying or redirecting goals because preferred routes appear inaccessible

Degree of agency	Relatively higher; the student retains meaningful choice and pathway control	Restricted; choice is narrowed by barriers beyond personal preference or ability
Main influences	Better information, counselling, exposure to alternatives and realistic planning	Poverty, weak schooling, lack of guidance, geographic isolation, gendered restrictions or limited institutional access
Self-efficacy and perceived outcomes	Confidence may be preserved or strengthened when achievable routes are clarified	Confidence may weaken when structural barriers are interpreted as personal inability
Counselling and policy response	Support flexible planning, informed choice, pathway visibility and transition support	Identify and reduce unnecessary barriers; expand guidance, financial information, digital access and institutional support

The distinction strengthens the paper's argument by showing that movement from aspiration to decision is negotiated, not merely psychological. Young people interpret opportunity, risk, feasibility and support within particular social and regional conditions. The distinction also avoids deficit explanations: students remain active decision-makers but their choices are made within unequal educational, institutional and labour-market arrangements.

Socio-Cultural Conditions Shaping Career Aspirations

Career aspirations among tribal youth develop within socio-cultural settings. Family background, community expectations, gender norms, cultural belonging, social recognition and occupational respectability influence which futures appear realistic, respectable and worth pursuing. Family is one of the earliest influences on career imagination. It may provide encouragement, financial support, educational expectations, course information, knowledge of employment routes and social networks. Parental education, household resources and familiarity with higher education may affect how widely students are exposed to possible careers (Archer et al., 2012). Where families understand educational and occupational pathways, students may view a wider range of careers as realistic; where knowledge is limited, they may rely more on familiar occupations, peers or locally visible work.

Family influence also affects perceived attainability. A career may be attractive but pursuit may depend on support for entrance preparation, travel, hostel fees, tuition, digital access or delayed income. Family expectations may support aspiration through encouragement and resources but may narrow choice when affordability, distance or uncertainty appear too risky. This does not mean family influence is simply restrictive; many families encourage education, public employment, professional mobility or meaningful work as routes to security and dignity.

Community expectations may shape the social legitimacy of career choices. Occupations may be valued for income, stability, social respect, public recognition, family security, community service or compatibility with local values. For tribal youth, career decisions may also be evaluated through collective responsibility, cultural belonging and social contribution. Such influence may motivate educational advancement but unfamiliar, distant, uncertain or weakly recognised careers may still be viewed as risky even when they offer future opportunities.

Cultural belonging need not limit aspiration. For some tribal youth, identity may offer social grounding, pride and responsibility toward family and community. Careers linked to local contribution or community development should therefore not be read automatically as limited ambition; they may reflect a wider understanding of success that includes security, service and belonging.

Gender norms also influence career pathways. Gendered expectations may affect educational and occupational choices (Eccles, 1994). Studies of tribal girl's schooling show how family, social and institutional conditions influence continuation or dropout (Nayak & Kumar, 2022). Some careers may seem appropriate because they

are stable, respectable or compatible with family expectations, while others may appear difficult because they require migration, extended training, public exposure, financial investment or uncertain employment. These patterns should not be generalised because gender relations vary by family, location and cultural context.

Socio-cultural conditions also influence self-efficacy and outcome expectations. When families, teachers, elders, peers and role models communicate confidence, young people may develop stronger beliefs that higher education, professional pathways, vocational training or public employment are achievable. Conversely, repeated discouragement, limited exposure, low expectations or lack of visible role models may weaken belief that certain pathways are within reach. Students and families may also evaluate careers by income, stability, respect, employability, security, cultural compatibility and community contribution.

Socio-cultural contexts can narrow career imagination by limiting what appears realistic or acceptable. They can also widen it when they provide encouragement, examples, information and social recognition. The same family or community setting may therefore work as both support and constraint, depending on the resources available to the student.

From the perspective of circumscription, socio-cultural conditions shape which occupations are excluded as unsuitable, unrealistic, too distant or socially unacceptable. From the perspective of Social Cognitive Career Theory, they shape self-efficacy, outcome expectations, perceived barriers and supports. A socio-cognitive reading avoids simplistic explanations: career aspirations among tribal youth are formed through the interaction of social recognition, cultural belonging, family support, gender expectations, perceived feasibility and personal confidence.

Institutional And Structural Conditions Shaping Career Horizons

Institutions shape whether aspirations become practical plans. Schools, colleges, vocational centres, counselling systems, digital access, labour-market networks and policy frameworks influence whether students can connect desired futures with actual routes. For tribal youth in Northeast India, regional location, institutional availability, household resources, transport and information access remain central (Marchang, 2020; Narzary et al., 2023), while district-level indicators provide the wider development context (NITI Aayog et al., 2025).

Schooling is one of the earliest institutional spaces through which students encounter formal knowledge, teachers, examinations, peer influence and ideas about work. Educational access, however, means more than enrolment. It includes school infrastructure, teacher availability and continuity indicators (Ministry of Education, 2022). For tribal students, welfare schemes, residential-schooling support and gendered barriers to continuation also shape educational pathways (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2024; Nayak & Kumar, 2022). When schools connect learning with future pathways, they may widen career awareness; when exposure is limited, students may rely on familiar occupations or informal information.

Schools also influence self-efficacy. Positive teaching experiences, academic achievement, mentoring, examination support and encouragement may strengthen student's belief that higher education, professional courses, vocational pathways or public employment are attainable. Conversely, weak academic foundations, limited subject choice, language difficulties, repeated failure or discouraging school environments may weaken confidence. Schools therefore do more than deliver curriculum; they also shape student's beliefs about capability, possibility and future success.

Access to higher education is another major factor shaping career horizons. Colleges, universities, professional institutions and technical programmes can expand occupational awareness by providing credentials, networks, exposure, skills and mobility routes. However, transition into higher education may be affected by family income, academic preparation, admission procedures, distance, hostel facilities and academic support (Marchang, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2024; Narzary et al., 2023). A desirable career may still appear unreachable if the route into higher education is unclear, costly or weakly supported.

Career guidance and counselling are central to converting aspiration into informed planning. Without adequate guidance, students may depend on family knowledge, peer influence, familiar occupations, social media or fragmented information. Guidance can help students understand eligibility, entrance routes, scholarships, subject choices, vocational options, skill requirements, labour-market conditions and alternative pathways (Bhogle, 2023; Mann et al., 2020; OECD, 2025). In relation to bounded career imagination, counselling can introduce unfamiliar careers, clarify practical steps and prevent avoidable narrowing.

Counselling also affects self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Students may avoid a preferred pathway because they misunderstand its requirements, overestimate its difficulty or underestimate available support. Accurate guidance can help students distinguish real from perceived barriers and support adaptive revision rather than premature abandonment of goals. For tribal youth in institutionally constrained settings, career guidance should therefore be culturally responsive, family-sensitive and connected to actual educational and labour-market opportunities.

Labour-market exposure shapes how students and families evaluate career value, risk and return. Careers are often assessed by expected income, stability, employability, social recognition and long-term security. When labour-market information is limited, students may struggle to connect education, skills, credentials and employment opportunities. Stronger labour-market awareness can support realistic planning by clarifying employment trends, skill requirements, local opportunities and routes beyond familiar occupations (Gardiner et al., 2020; OECD, 2025). National labour-market data provide the wider employment context (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2024).

Vocational education and skill development can widen career pathways, especially for students outside conventional academic routes or seeking employment-linked training. However, vocational pathways matter only when visible, credible, accessible and linked with real opportunities. If vocational education is perceived as a weak second choice, it may lack legitimacy; if centres are distant, poorly resourced or disconnected from labour markets, they may remain unattainable. Its value depends on quality, certification, acceptance, progression routes and employment linkage (Biswal et al., 2025; Rajendran & Paul, 2020; Sarkar, 2020).

Policy support forms part of the wider environment in which educational access, skill development, tribal welfare, schooling, scholarships and regional development initiatives operate. Policies may expand opportunity by improving schooling, supporting higher education, providing assistance, strengthening training and addressing regional disparities (Ministry of Education, 2020; Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2023; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2024). However, policy presence alone does not guarantee aspirational expansion. Students and families must know about schemes, understand eligibility, access institutions and receive timely support, making implementation and local capacity central.

Institutional conditions also shape whether compromise becomes adaptive or constrained. When students receive reliable information, academic support, counselling, financial guidance and exposure to alternative pathways, career adjustment may become adaptive. When such support is absent, students may lower, delay or redirect aspirations because the preferred route appears unaffordable, distant, socially unsupported or institutionally unclear.

For tribal youth in Northeast India, career horizons depend on the full pathway from aspiration to opportunity. Schools need to build academic confidence and career exposure; higher education needs stronger transition support; counselling must be reliable and context-sensitive; vocational programmes must be credible and employment-linked; and policy support must be visible, accessible and locally workable.

Circumscription And Formation of Career Aspirations

Career aspirations are not formed only at the point of final career choice. They develop gradually as young people observe occupations, compare futures, receive encouragement or discouragement, interpret social expectations and evaluate what appears realistic. Some occupations become visible, desirable and socially

acceptable, while others remain unfamiliar, distant, risky or inaccessible. Gottfredson's concept of circumscription explains how young people progressively eliminate occupational options on the basis of perceived accessibility, social prestige, gender suitability and self-concept (Gottfredson, 1981, 2002).

Circumscription often begins before formal career decision-making. Students may form early impressions of work through family members, teachers, peers, media, community experience, public-sector employment patterns, local role models and visible employment. Where occupational exposure is narrow, career imagination may also narrow. The issue is therefore not simply whether students possess ambition but whether they have access to information, examples, guidance and institutional routes through which different futures can be imagined as possible.

This paper uses bounded career imagination to describe the careers students come to see as visible, legitimate and attainable when exposure, guidance, institutional access, role models and labour-market information are uneven. The concept does not imply weak ambition. It shows how ambition itself is shaped by the conditions through which young people learn what careers exist, which are valued and which routes seem reachable.

In this review, bounded career imagination is understood through three related processes. The first is visibility. A career is more likely to enter a student's field of aspiration when it is known, named, explained and represented through family experience, school exposure, media, role models, counselling or community networks. Careers that are not visible may remain outside serious consideration, even when the student has the ability to pursue them.

The second process is legitimacy. Even when a career is known, it must also appear socially acceptable, respectable and compatible with family expectations, community values, gender norms and cultural belonging. Some occupations may be valued because they promise stability, public respect, family security or upward mobility. Others may appear unfamiliar, risky or socially unsuitable. Career aspiration is therefore shaped not only by individual preference but also by social recognition and perceived respectability.

The third process is attainability. A career may be visible and socially valued but still appear unreachable if the educational route is unclear, expensive, distant, competitive or weakly supported. Attainability may depend on schooling quality, subject availability, academic preparation, entrance information, financial support, scholarships, transport, digital access, language support, counselling and labour-market knowledge. When these supports are weak, students may exclude preferred careers because the pathway appears practically inaccessible.

These three processes are closely connected with self-efficacy and outcome expectations. A student may know and value a career but hesitate if they doubt their ability to succeed in the required pathway. Self-efficacy influences whether students believe they can meet academic, financial, institutional and social demands (Bandura, 1997; Lent et al., 1994). Outcome expectations influence whether a pathway is expected to lead to employment, income, security, recognition, mobility or fulfilment. Thus, bounded career imagination is mediated by student's interpretations of capability, risk, support and likely returns.

Gender, locality and institutional access shape bounded career imagination. Gendered expectations may affect educational and occupational choices (Eccles, 1994) and tribal girl's schooling experiences show how family, social and institutional conditions influence continuation or dropout (Nayak & Kumar, 2022). Locality shapes access to schools, colleges, transport and livelihood/employment opportunities. In Northeast India, where conditions vary across communities and districts, perceived attainable careers may differ significantly across locations (Marchang, 2018, 2019, 2020).

Bounded career imagination helps avoid deficit-based readings of tribal youth aspirations. It shifts attention from whether young people are ambitious enough to whether ambition is adequately informed, supported and connected to pathways. Modest-looking aspirations may reflect limited exposure, weak guidance, financial pressure, few role models, uncertain employment routes or concerns about feasibility.

Understanding bounded career imagination also clarifies the role of educational institutions and career guidance. Expanding aspiration requires more than motivational encouragement. Students need reliable information about courses, scholarships, entrance routes, vocational options, professional pathways, labour-market demands and alternative routes into meaningful work, along with role models, counselling and institutional pathways that make unfamiliar careers reachable.

For tribal youth in Northeast India, aspiration formation turns on visibility, legitimacy and attainability. Careers enter or leave serious consideration according to what students encounter, what their social environment validates and what institutions make feasible. Circumscription is therefore not only personal narrowing; it is a social and socio-cognitive process through which young people learn which futures can be imagined, valued and pursued.

Compromise, Adjustment and Career Decision-Making

Career decision-making often involves movement from preferred aspirations to choices that appear more realistic within a social, educational and institutional context. Young people may begin with desired occupational goals but these can change when they encounter educational limitations, economic pressure, geographic distance, family expectations, limited guidance, gendered restrictions or uncertainty about employment outcomes. Gottfredson's concept of compromise explains how individuals adjust preferred career choices when desired options appear difficult to access, sustain or achieve (Gottfredson, 1981, 2002).

For tribal youth in Northeast India, compromise is not simply reduced ambition. It may reflect careful planning, family responsibility, cultural belonging or unequal opportunity structures. A student may step away from a preferred pathway because the route appears unaffordable, distant, academically unclear, socially unsupported or weakly linked to employment.

Social Cognitive Career Theory helps explain compromise through self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, supports and perceived barriers (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 1994, 2000). Students are more likely to pursue a preferred career when they believe they can meet its demands, expect meaningful outcomes and receive support. They are more likely to revise or abandon a goal when barriers appear strong, support appears weak or outcomes are uncertain.

This paper distinguishes between adaptive compromise and constrained compromise. Adaptive compromise refers to informed adjustment of career goals in ways that preserve meaningful future possibilities. It occurs when students revise plans after gaining better information about eligibility, preparation, costs, alternatives, scholarships, vocational routes, labour-market conditions or realistic timelines. Such compromise may reflect maturity, flexibility and practical planning rather than failure.

Constrained compromise refers to lowering, delaying or redirecting aspirations because of structural, educational, economic, gendered or institutional barriers. It occurs when students reduce preferred goals because they lack access to quality schooling, counselling, financial support, transport, digital resources, subject choices, role models, institutional pathways or reliable labour-market information. In this form of compromise, choice is narrowed by conditions beyond personal preference or ability.

The distinction is important because the same outward career decision may have different meanings. Choosing a locally available course may be adaptive if the student understands the options and sees a credible pathway but constrained if the preferred course is unaffordable, distant, discouraged or unknown. Similarly, vocational training may represent informed career planning when linked to employment but constrained compromise when academic routes are inaccessible or poorly supported.

Economic and geographic conditions may shape the form of compromise. Family income, examination preparation costs, hostel fees, transport expenses, digital access, scholarship availability and uncertainty about employment returns may influence which careers appear practical. Students may choose shorter courses, nearby

institutions, public-sector preparation, vocational routes or work that supports family needs. These choices should be interpreted in relation to available support and opportunity, not dismissed as low aspiration.

Family, community and gender expectations also shape career decisions. Families may encourage education, mobility and professional ambition but may also prefer pathways that appear secure, affordable, respectable or close to home. Community expectations may shape occupational dignity, public recognition, gender suitability, family duty and social contribution. Gendered concerns about mobility, safety, domestic responsibility, marriage, public participation or acceptable work may intensify constrained compromise. These patterns should not be generalised across families, communities and regions.

Compromise also involves changes in self-efficacy and outcome expectations. Encouragement, academic success, mentoring, role models and counselling may strengthen confidence and support adaptive compromise. Repeated barriers, weak preparation, lack of guidance, financial pressure or uncertain employment prospects may weaken confidence and produce constrained compromise. Students may begin to interpret structural barriers as personal inability. This is why counselling and institutional support are important: they can help students distinguish between realistic adjustment and avoidable narrowing.

The distinction between adaptive and constrained compromise has practical value for career guidance. Counsellors, teachers and institutions should ask not only what career a student has chosen but why it was chosen and what alternatives were available. Adaptive compromise may require pathway planning, skill preparation and confidence-building. Constrained compromise calls for barrier identification, scholarship information, family-inclusive counselling, exposure to alternative routes and support for re-opening feasible options.

The distinction also has policy relevance. Policies that encourage aspiration may be insufficient if students lack credible pathways to act on those aspirations. Expanding career choice requires stronger school-to-work information systems, accessible counselling, financial guidance, vocational credibility, higher-education transition support, role-model exposure, digital access and labour-market linkage. Without such support, students may appear to be choosing modest goals when they are adjusting to institutional absence.

For tribal youth in Northeast India, career decision-making is a negotiation among aspiration, feasibility, support and constraint. Compromise is adaptive when it helps students pursue meaningful futures through informed planning. It is constrained when social, educational, economic or institutional barriers redirect aspirations that might have been pursued under better-supported conditions.

DISCUSSION

The review shows that career aspirations among tribal youth in Northeast India are produced through the interaction of socio-cultural, institutional and socio-cognitive conditions. Rather than simple preferences, aspirations develop in settings where family background, community expectations, gender norms, educational access, institutional support, labour-market exposure and guidance affect what young people consider desirable, respectable and possible.

A central implication is that tribal youth should not be treated as a homogeneous category. Northeast India includes diverse tribal communities and districts with different livelihood systems, educational experiences, regional locations, institutional access and development conditions (Marchang, 2018, 2019, 2020; Narzary et al., 2023; NITI Aayog et al., 2025). These differences shape how young people interpret education, employment, mobility, stability, cultural belonging and social advancement. Research on career aspiration in this context must therefore remain sensitive to community-specific and region-specific realities.

The main academic contribution lies in integrating Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise with Social Cognitive Career Theory. This integration examines career aspiration through exposure, evaluation, narrowing and adjustment. Gottfredson's theory explains how some options may be excluded because of perceived accessibility, prestige, gender suitability, cultural acceptability or self-concept (Gottfredson, 1981,

2002). Social Cognitive Career Theory explains how self-efficacy, outcome expectations, goals, supports and barriers influence whether young people pursue, revise, delay or redirect pathways (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 1994, 2000). Together, these theories connect opportunity structures with evaluations of ability, risk and feasibility.

The two analytical ideas sharpen this contribution. Bounded career imagination explains why futures narrow when exposure, guidance, role models, institutional routes and labour-market information are limited. Adaptive and constrained compromise clarify whether career adjustment reflects informed planning or forced narrowing. Together, these ideas move the discussion away from deficit explanations and toward the information, support and alternatives available to students.

This argument has practical implications for career counselling. Guidance for tribal youth should help students identify interests, strengths, educational requirements, entrance routes, scholarship opportunities, vocational options, skill needs, labour-market realities and alternative pathways (Bhogle, 2023; Mann et al., 2020; OECD, 2025). Counselling should also help students distinguish realistic adjustment from avoidable narrowing through planning, support, confidence-building, barrier identification, family-inclusive counselling and financial guidance.

The policy implications are equally important. Policies that encourage aspiration may have limited effect if students lack credible routes to act on those aspirations. Expanding career horizons requires stronger school-to-work information systems, counselling, labour-market information, role models, digital access, higher-education transition support, vocational pathways and regionally responsive implementation (Ministry of Education, 2020; Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2023; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2024). Uniform interventions may not address barriers across communities, districts and educational settings.

The review also suggests caution in academic and policy language. It is not enough to ask tribal youth to aspire higher without addressing the conditions that shape whether wider aspirations are visible, believable and attainable. Aspiration-based language can become unfair when responsibility is placed on students while unequal educational, institutional and labour-market structures remain unchanged. A socio-cognitive approach avoids this problem by recognising both agency and constraint.

Overall, the review offers a framework for studying career aspirations among tribal youth in Northeast India through circumscription, compromise, self-efficacy, outcome expectations, supports and barriers. Its practical implication is that wider career futures require visible information, feasible routes and institutional support, not encouragement alone.

Limitations And Future Research

This paper has certain limitations. Since it is an integrative review, it does not present primary field data from tribal students, parents, teachers, counsellors or institutions. The arguments are conceptual and interpretive, based on selected theoretical, empirical, review-based and policy-oriented literature. The paper does not claim statistical generalisability or direct representation of all tribal youth in Northeast India. Rather, it develops an analytical framework for understanding career aspirations, circumscription, compromise and socio-cognitive career processes (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

A second limitation concerns the diversity of tribal communities in Northeast India. The region includes varied tribal groups with different livelihood systems, educational experiences, geographic locations, institutional contexts and development conditions. Because of this diversity, the discussion cannot be generalised uniformly. Although the review remains context-sensitive, it is limited by the availability and focus of existing studies on tribal education, higher education, youth aspirations and regional development in Northeast India (Marchang, 2018, 2019, 2020; Narzary et al., 2023; Ningthoujam et al., 2021; NITI Aayog et al., 2025).

A further limitation is the uneven availability of literature directly connecting tribal youth in Northeast India with Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise and Social Cognitive Career Theory. Within the literature reviewed for this paper, fewer studies explicitly integrate these theoretical perspectives with the socio-cultural, educational and institutional realities of tribal youth in Northeast India. The present review should therefore be read as a conceptual synthesis rather than a definitive empirical model.

Future research should examine how tribal students form, revise and negotiate career aspirations across secondary, higher secondary, undergraduate and vocational contexts with the use of primary data. Longitudinal, comparative, qualitative and mixed-methods studies could explore family background, gender, school environment, peer influence, digital access, career guidance, financial constraints, labour-market exposure and institutional support. Community-specific, district-level and gender-sensitive studies are important because tribal communities in Northeast India differ in cultural practices, livelihood patterns, educational access and regional opportunities.

Future empirical work can also test, refine and apply bounded career imagination and the distinction between adaptive and constrained compromise. Studies could examine how students identify careers as visible, legitimate and attainable; how exposure, guidance, role models and institutional access shape perceived career possibilities; and how students distinguish realistic adjustment from forced narrowing. Such research could help determine whether these concepts are useful across tribal communities, educational levels, genders and regional settings.

More research is also needed on career counselling and intervention models suitable for tribal students. Future studies could assess school-based career cells, mentorship programmes, exposure visits, family-inclusive counselling, digital career platforms, scholarship guidance and community-linked career awareness initiatives. Intervention-based research may help identify which forms of guidance strengthen career adaptability, career decision-making self-efficacy and related career outcomes (Wang et al., 2024; Whiston et al., 2017). Future studies can examine whether such interventions also widen career imagination and reduce constrained compromise.

Vocational education, gendered experiences and policy implementation also require further investigation. Future studies should examine how tribal youth perceive vocational training, what barriers affect participation and whether training is linked with credible employment outcomes (Biswal et al., 2025; Rajendran & Paul, 2020; Sarkar, 2020). Research should also examine how students and families access education, skill-development, tribal welfare, residential-schooling and scholarship policies at school, college, community and district levels.

Future research should move from general statements about aspiration to closer analysis of how career possibilities become visible, legitimate, attainable, narrowed or redirected. Such work would strengthen the empirical basis of the framework proposed here and support more context-sensitive career guidance and policy intervention.

CONCLUSION

Career aspirations among tribal youth in Northeast India are best understood as socially situated and socio-cognitive processes. They are shaped by interest and motivation but also by family background, community expectations, gender norms, educational access, institutional support, labour-market exposure, self-efficacy, outcome expectations and perceived opportunity. The central question is not only what young people aspire to become but how they learn, evaluate and pursue possible futures.

This review has argued that tribal youth in Northeast India should not be treated as a homogeneous category. Their educational and occupational pathways are shaped by livelihood systems, geographic conditions, educational access, institutional access and regional development processes (Marchang, 2018, 2019, 2020; Narzary et al., 2023; NITI Aayog et al., 2025). A context-sensitive approach is therefore necessary for understanding how aspirations are formed across communities, districts, educational settings and family circumstances.

The paper's main academic contribution lies in integrating Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise with Social Cognitive Career Theory to explain career aspiration as a process of exposure, evaluation, narrowing and adjustment. This framework bridges structural and psychological explanations by recognising that young people actively interpret opportunities, risks and supports while making decisions within unequal social, educational and institutional conditions.

The review advances two analytical ideas: bounded career imagination and the distinction between adaptive compromise and constrained compromise. These concepts clarify why career adjustment should not be interpreted simply as failure, weak motivation or lack of ambition. Aspirations that appear modest from the outside may reflect responsible planning, family obligation, meaningful local orientation or realistic pathway selection. They may also reflect constrained opportunity.

Expanding career horizons among tribal youth requires more than motivational encouragement. It depends on reliable career information, culturally responsive counselling, visible role models, credible higher-education and vocational routes, labour-market awareness and policy implementation. Broader aspirations become possible when encouragement is matched by conditions that make those futures visible, credible and attainable.

Declarations

Ethical approval

This study is a concept-led integrative review based on published scholarly literature and publicly available policy documents. It did not involve primary data collection from human participants, institutions or communities. No interviews, surveys, observations, experiments or personal data were collected or analysed. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data availability

No primary dataset was generated or analysed. The manuscript is based on published scholarly literature and publicly available policy documents cited in the reference list.

Author contributions

Mary Mannala and Bipul Bez conceptualised the study, reviewed the literature, developed the conceptual synthesis and prepared the manuscript draft. Dr. Saumitra Dixit supervised the work, provided academic guidance and reviewed the manuscript.

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