



Educational Status of the Marginalized: A Study among the Santals of Paschim Medinipur District, West Bengal

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ABSTRACT Educational inequality and accessibility of the marginalized people of the country has been significant issues of research among the researchers and academicians. It has been observed that education policies so far adopted in India aimed to reduce the educational inequalities particularly focusing more on the disadvantaged groups and outreach regions of India. However, the result in this sector is far away from the expectations. The present empirical study based on fieldwork in two villages of Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal, is an attempt to investigate several dimensions related to the problems of education among the Santal tribes. It focused to identify the enrolment, dropout and retention scenario in primary schools, especially among the Santali students. Further, the study examines the nature of problems associated with school going children and their parents. In order to collect primary data the study adopted few anthropological field methods like case study, household interview and observation of school students.

INTRODUCTION

The vulnerability of tribal populations to exploitation.....can largely be traced to their illiteracy (Fürer-Haimendorf 1982).

The importance of education as a tool to improve human development has been widely recognized throughout the globe (World Bank 1990; Sen 1999; Dreze 2006). More specifically it is assumed that primary education has been an important source of reducing inequalities by empowering the community. A third world country like India has initiated rapid expansion of educational enrolment since many decades ago. It has been observed across all the five-year plans that education policies so far adopted in India aimed to reduce the educational inequalities particularly focusing more on the disadvantaged groups and unreached regions of India. The government of India is constitutionally obliged to provide basic elementary education to each child of the country. Despite the constitutional provision, the government has initiated different policies for advances of tribals in education. One of the major steps in this is 'National Policy of Education' 1986 which has incorpo-

rated some important steps including establishment of more primary schools in tribal areas, reading materials in tribal languages and establishment of residential schools for tribal children (Government of India 1986). However, despite these affirmative action's, education inequalities of certain disadvantage/focused groups is in dwindling state as proven by literacy data (Desai and Kulkarni 2008). While the researchers have failed to point out to why these inequalities continue inspite of government sponsored policies, indeed it is observed that very few empirically grounded studies have been done on the failure/success of affirmative policies pertaining to reduce educational inequalities of focused groups.

The tribal people of India constitutionally called as the Scheduled Tribe, consist of 8.6 percent of the total population of India, which is more than 104 million people (Census 2011). India has 573 different tribal communities, living mostly in remote hilly and forest areas of the county. Their own distinct language which is almost 273 in number is very unique and different from the mainstream population. However, the Schedule Tribes of India are historically alien-

ated from the development process as well as their inclusion in education remains in pitiable stage even after seven decades of India's independence. Considering the truth that Scheduled Tribes are one of the most deprived and marginalized groups with respect to education, special care is needed in delivering elementary education to them. Ironically, the lack of tribal socio-economic background and cultural knowledge of the educational policy makers has resulted in them being far lagged behind in education only from mainstream Hindus, but also from schedule caste groups.

Anthropologists and other social scientists since from very past have engaged in examining educational scenario of tribes, as part of the tribal development (Aiyappan 1948; Elwin 1979; Chattopadhyay 1953; Biswas 1954). Early anthropological studies on tribal education have concentrated on the relationship between socio-economic condition and education. They focused on the needs and problems of tribal education and suggested that tribal education should be oriented in such a way that it relates with their own environment which will ultimately empower them in their ongoing progress. Sachidanand (1967) argued that tribal education is closely related with tribal economic development. Srivastava (1981) has also commented that economic hardship adversely affected education of tribal children. Das (1979) has considered that lower position of tribes in social stratification is one of the main reasons which has led to the backwardness of tribals in education. Another intensive field based study on Yenadi tribe has revealed various issues related to the backwardness of Yenadi tribe in education (Sujatha 1987). In addition, Sujatha has rightly observed that since the British times to the present five year plans of government of India, all the policies have been basically based on micro perspective and does not reflect tribal traditional norms and values (Sujatha 1988). Gautam (2003) through statistical analysis examined the medium of instruction in delivering elementary education to the tribal children. Some more criticism was found in the study of Ashram schools of Maharashtra which was established exclusively for tribal children. In that analysis, Goyal (2016) has argued that the residential tribal schools in Maharashtra are deeply corrupted and abuse children. However, few scholars emphasized the importance of establishing residential schools especially in hilly

and forest dominant tribal areas (Jindal 2015). Another significant observation in existing educational scenario is the lack of extremely low enrolment in conflicted areas, as investigated by Kumar (2017). In his excellent narrative, Kumar has stressed how the clash between Maoist and government in the extremists affected areas of Chhattisgarh has resulted in poor enrolment of students in primary schools. Rupavath (2016) has found out that barriers like lack of active participation of tribal children in school educational system further create the space for marginalization of tribal communities in terms of educational attainment.

The study on the educational problems of tribes of West Bengal had also started long ago. Bhowmick (1985), the renowned action anthropologist had conducted extensive study on the socio-economic and education scenario of Lodha tribe of West Bengal and Roy Burman (1987) on the education and development situation of Toto tribe of North Bengal. This tradition has been later continued by anthropologists along with other social scientists. Chaudhuri (1992) has published an edited volume which contains different aspects of tribal educational problems and tribal literacy; Sengupta and Guha (2002) mention different socio-economic and demographic factors responsible for enrolment and dropout scenario of girl children in West Bengal; Duary (2010), particularly had focused on educational status of Lodha tribes of West Bengal and Roy (2005) had worked on issue of gender in tribal education among tea tribes of North Bengal with a dominant and subordinate (of language) approach in accessing education. Alongside the above cited investigation by different scholars, major research on educational scenario of West Bengal has been also carried out by Amartya Sen headed Pratichi Trust. They have done extensive qualitative research on different issues related to children education with focus on dis-advantage groups (Rana 2010).

Tribes in West Bengal: Education and Literacy

The total population of West Bengal at 2001 census was 80,176,197. Of this 4,406,794 persons are Scheduled Tribes (STs) constituting 5.5 percent of the total population of the state. The state has registered 15.7 percent decadal growth of ST population in 1991-2001. There are total thirty eight (38) notified STs in the state.

Population: Size and Distribution

The Santal represents more than half of the total ST population of the state (51.8%). Oraon (14%), Munda (7.8%), Bhumij (7.6%) and Kora (3.2%) are the other major STs having sizeable population. Along with Santal, they constitute nearly eighty-five percent of the state's total ST population. The Lodha, Mahali, Bhutia, Bedia, and Savar are the remaining STs, and having population of one percent or more. The rest of the STs are very small in population size (Table 1).

Table 1: Population and proportion of 10 major STs, 2011 census

S. No.	Name of the scheduled tribe	Total population	Proportion to the total ST population
	All Scheduled Tribes	52,96,953	100%
1	Santal	25,12,331	47.42
2	Oraon	6,43,510	12.14
3	Bhumij	3,76,296	7.10
4	Munda	3,66,386	6.91
5	Kora	1,59,404	3
6	Lodha, Kheria, Kharia	1,08,707	2.05
7	Mahali	81,594	1.54
8	Bhutia	66,627	1.25
9	Bedia	88,772	1.67
10	Savar	40,374	0.76

Source: Census of India 2011

Literacy Rate

Among all STs, 43.4 percent of the population has been termed as literate, which is lower than the national average (47.1%). The male literacy rate of 57.4 percent and female of 29.2 percent, show a gender disparity in literacy. Of the ten major STs, Bhutia with 72.6 percent overall literacy, 80.2 percent male and 65.2 percent female literacy respectively, are well ahead of others. Savar are at the other extreme having 26.3 percent overall literacy and sixteen percent female literacy rate (Table 2).

Objectives

1. To identify the enrolment, dropout and retention scenario of Santali children in primary schools.
2. To examine the nature of problems associated with school going children.

Table 2: Literacy rate among 10 major STs (above 7 years of age)

S. No.	Name of the scheduled tribe	Total population	Male	Female
	All Scheduled Tribes	43.4	57.4	29.2
1	Santal	42.2	57.3	27.0
2	Oraon	43.4	55.4	31.0
3	Munda	41.0	54.0	27.7
4	Bhumij	45.6	61.6	29.1
5	Kora	43.4	58.4	28.2
6	Lodha	34.8	46.8	22.5
7	Mahali	41.1	55.6	26.3
8	Bhutia	72.6	80.2	65.2
9	Bedia	48.4	61.7	34.6
10	Savar	26.3	36.4	16.0

Source: Census of India 2001

3. To find out the causes of dropout among Santali children in West Bengal.

METHODOLOGY

To understand the nature of problems associated with educational problems of tribal children, the researchers has used some anthropological methods and tools in order to capture the ground realities from the perspective of the community itself. During their field visit, they often conducted individual interviews and case studies among the stakeholders of the two villages Jhitka and Bhumij Dhansole of Binpur Block in West Medinipur district of West Bengal. The data were collected from the nearest village primary school which is 2 km away from both villages. Nearly 30 tribal children from different classes were interviewed and all the teachers of the school were also interviewed respectively. A structured interview schedule with high degree of flexibility in responding has been used in the fieldwork for interviewing the informants. Apart from primary sources, secondary data were collected from Census of India and academic journals. In general, the researchers' experience of the field has been used to contextualize the problem.

The Study Area

The data for this paper comes mainly from two villages namely Jhitka and Bhumij Dhansole of Binpur-I Sub-Division under the Lalgargh Police Station of West Medinipur district, a south-western part of West Bengal. West Medinipur is the home of many tribal groups. These

two villages are surrounded by Jhitka forest range and situated in the interior of the deep forest. Bhumij Dhansol has ninety-two percent of population in ST category and Jhitka has seventy percent of population in the Scheduled Tribes category (based on fieldwork census data).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The States of Education: Ground Level Analysis

Dropout Scenario

The studied villages are dependent on a single primary school which is nearly 2 km away from the villages. It was found that due to government campaign, students were enrolled in school, but after 1-2 years they lost interest in attending the school. The dropout statistics are obtained from the school register represented in Table 3.

To find out the reason of dropout scenario, the researchers interviewed three categories of stakeholders. Below is the list of reasons for the dropout. It is important to examine the students' view first.

Psychological Barrier

Tribal children are growing in a very natural habitual environment; most of their indigenous knowledge is derived from their traditional way of learning. Rather than studying in a structured atmosphere, they are mostly interested in learning in the lap of nature. Thus even a small tribal child would know which plant is necessary for which disease as they have frequently visited the forest for their socio-cultural needs. It is in

the school where probably they first observed any non-tribal person (the teacher), first saw blackboard and books in a language which is not their mother tongue; lots of unknown faces create a strong fear in psychology of newly admitted tribal child. A child from class II revealed that *"I really don't want to go to school; it's not that the teachers are shouted on us, but every time they gave us new topic to read, the topics are difficult to understand. I really felt afraid whenever I face the teachers, even outside the schools."* If these psychological barriers lasted in the mind of child, then the child would steadily lose interest in attending the school, thus resulting into dropout.

Language Problem

The problem of language as a barrier to the elementary education has already established by different scholars. The government of West Bengal provide free elementary education only in 'Bangla' medium. The Santali children are speaking 'Olchiki' at their home, therefore a sudden change of language in the medium of instruction would definitely destroy their interest in attending the school. By providing elementary education only in dominant regional language, the State is also suppressing tribal languages which also have rich history. The burden of language is also an obstacle for fruitful communication between teachers and tribal students. As the teachers are taking classes in Bengali, asking questions in Bengali and also using it as medium of conversion, the tribal children are losing their interest in taking part in the educational system. A student of class II describe that *"I was never fully understood what the teachers said. He is also speaks Bengali very speedy; so that many times I was just stop myself to talk with teachers."* Although the gov-

Table 3: Dropout scenario of tribal children in studied village

Village name	2012-13		2013-14		2014-15	
	Number of enrolment	Number of dropout in (12-13)	Number of enrolment	Number of dropout (13-14)	Number of enrolment	Number of dropout (15-16)
Bhumij Dhansole	105 (100)	48 (45.71)	112 (100)	52 (46.42)	130 (100)	38 (29.23)
Jhitka	85 (100)	46 (54.11)	94 (100)	50 (53.19)	115 (100)	29 (25.21)

Source: School attendance register and field survey 2015

Note: Numbers of enrolment and dropout are including of all students from class I-IV
Figures in parenthesis are percentage of total

ernment of West Bengal has just started to use 'Olchiki' as medium of instruction in primary school, but it is in very few places.

Parents Unwillingness

In the studied village, most of the tribal families traditionally depend on forest based livelihood. The school going children are the first generation who attended a school. Due to lack of economic ability, the parents do not want to enrol their children in village school. There is a common phobia among tribal parents of the villages that education is very costly, that is why many tribal parents stop their children's education after completing primary education. The tribal families want that their children should be a source of extra labour in the family whenever needed. A father of a class IV boy's from Jhitka village aggressively said that, "*Now the government provided just one time meal to our children, but if my children would go to collect forest products with me, we can together earn much more. Beside that what we should do with high education? I don't have much money to spend on their education. Ultimately we have to work manually for our livelihood. Thus education is seemed to be a luxurious thing for our children.*" Significantly, lack of parent unwillingness and extra household responsibilities adversely affect tribal children education.

Teachers View

The teachers are equally important in successful implementation of educational policies as their quality teaching is necessary for creating better future. However, the researchers have found that teachers are mostly busy with administrative work. Both the schools have only 4 teachers including the headmaster. A teacher helplessly argued that "*I know that we have failed to deliver good quality teaching and the obvious reason is tons of administrative works. You see that I have come sharply at 10 AM. After reached at school, I was busy for preparing mid-day meals, had to maintain used grocery amounts, I have to fill up data for different government schemes in favour of students, I have to look on the distribution of mid-day meals at noon and also have to note the consumption number of meals. After that we had to visit market for buying vegetables and other items for*

tomorrow's meal. In addition to that we have to go for government duties. So how could I teach well?" It is thus clear that if the teacher's administrative loads are decreased then it might result in quality teaching.

Influence of Right to Education Act

It is true that, RTE Act has created very positive impact in overall enrolment of the students in the studied villages. This study observed that while enrolment in lower primary is good, but it gradually decreases in upper primary. The numbers of tribal students are low in higher classes. During the researchers' fieldwork, it was found that almost 1-2 students were admitted under RTE Act in each of the school. However, it is important to note that, most of the villagers are unacquainted with the procedure of RTE Act. It was found that lack of proper campaign from both school authorities and local administration was indeed the reason for poor impact of RTE Act. Although villagers agreed that teachers from the school used to visit their village once in a year in order to promote student enrolment. Nevertheless, apart from administrative failure, many parents have argued that, they sent their child only for mid-day meal purpose. Whenever they attain certain age, the parents employed their child in various occupational activities. Thus even, the implementation of RTE Act did not have much influence on the overall educational development of Santali tribe in the village.

From the observations of educational scenario at the village, it is manifested that educational inclusion, access and enrolment of tribal children in the studied village is inadequate. Even after introduction of several imperative measures from government, still villagers are facing several obstacles towards fearless educational attainment. The reasons which are thoroughly discussed above nevertheless denote their (of tribals') backwardness in education. The observations illustrated that lack of proper infrastructure and economic inability of the villagers towards education cost are also other reasons for marginalized education. This view is also strongly advocated by various previous studies done by different scholars. Lack of interest of children and parents is one of the reasons which was also argued by Gautam (2003). Thus, it is manifested that one of the reasons for this unwillingness towards school enrolment was solely

associated with the poor economic condition of the family. It has been noticed that many tribal children were engaged in different types of economic activities while female students were mostly engaged in household activities instead of going to school. The village has also witnessed Maoist violence before 2009, due to which village school was forced to shut down and schools of neighbouring villages were also either destroyed or converted as security camp. Indeed, this incident rigorously hampered village education and it continued for next few years. Kumar (2017) also reported the same kind of phenomena in his study of children education in extremist affected areas of Chhattisgarh. On the basis of observation, this study also argues that different educational schemes are not enough to improve tribal education. The intervention of local government institute like *panchayat* is essential to understand the problem of tribals related to education and solve it along with the regular campaign for educational enrolment.

CONCLUSION

This empirical study examined the scenario of elementary education of the Santal tribe from a micro perspective. The study through its ground level findings has identified some of the barriers that acted as obstacles in the development of tribal children education. It is important to note that, policy making is not the only solution to increase school enrolments; instead, emphasis should also be given to other factors which play crucial role in children education. Improving parents' mentality is an example in this regard, which is indeed one of the most important factors in successful development of tribal children. The study points out that lack of infrastructure facilities like manpower and separate room for mid-day meal has also significantly affected daily educational activities within the school. The above discussion articulates that there is profound gap in the policy and its implementation of elementary education which not only alienates tribal communities but also act as an impediment in their economic development. The lack of tribal socio-economic background and cultural knowledge among the educational policy makers has contributed in the current pitiable situation of tribal population in education. Although, it is the situation of primary education of tribal children of Medinipur district, the

scenario is almost equivalent in rest of the tribal dominated areas of the country. The above mentioned problems clearly indicate what the policy makers need to add while developing elementary educational policy within tribal population.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study would recommend following measures in order to improve the educational inclusion of tribals in the studied village. In order to remove the psychological fear among tribal children, the study would advice to recruit more number of teachers from the tribal communities and the non-tribal teachers to be familiar with some sort of tribal culture and behaviour. This would help to build better interaction in classroom among tribal children and non-tribal teachers. Further this study would suggest to include Santali language (*Olchiki*) as medium of instruction at primary level to remove the language barrier among the students. The local governance members of the village can play a significant role in creating awareness of education among the villagers. They are supposed to act as a bridge between the school authority and villagers reckoning various aspects of village education.

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