

Tribal Education and Gender Gap: A Study of the Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal

Arup Majumder¹

Abstract

Education is a key driver of development, yet gender disparity in education remains prevalent among marginalized groups in India. This study examines the recent trends in tribal education, particularly focusing on the gender gap within the Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal. Four districts—Alipurduar, Birbhum, Purulia, and South 24 Parganas—were selected, representing diverse tribal populations. Secondary data from the Census of India (2011) and Statistics of School Education (2010-11) were supplemented by primary data from fieldwork across these districts. The study utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods, including structured surveys, interviews with teachers and parents, and case studies of students. Findings indicate significant district- and community-specific variations in educational outcomes, with a positive trend in girls' education and a narrowing gender gap, primarily due to developmental programs aimed at promoting tribal girls' education. This paper contributes to the broader discourse on social equity and development.

Keywords: Education, Tribal Girls, Gender Gap, Development Schemes, Change.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental driver of social, economic, and political transformation. It is widely acknowledged as a primary avenue for national development and empowerment. As Sachhidananda (1992) emphasized, education serves as an essential tool for "man-making" and nation-building. It not only shapes individuals but also plays a critical role in the advancement of society by addressing inequalities across socio-economic groups and regions. By bridging gaps in access and quality, education mitigates disparities, reduces tensions, and enhances the effective utilization of other resources, thereby fostering overall

¹ Former Research Associate, School of Language and Linguistics, Jadavpur University

development. In the Indian context, education has long been viewed as a means to rectify historical disadvantages faced by marginalized communities. The National Education Policies of 1968, 1986, and 1992 underscored three central pillars: equity, accessibility, and quality. These principles have guided the development of educational programs aimed at ensuring that all segments of society, including tribal communities, have equal opportunities to access and benefit from education.

Tribal populations in India, however, face unique challenges in achieving educational parity. These challenges stem from socio-economic backwardness, geographical isolation, and cultural distinctiveness, all of which complicate their integration into the formal educational system. Venkataiah (2001) notes that tribal education must address the specific needs and aspirations of these groups, taking into account their unique socio-cultural context and varying levels of development. Education, therefore, becomes not just a tool for economic empowerment but also for strengthening the internal resilience of tribal communities, enabling them to face emerging challenges. West Bengal is home to 40 officially recognized Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities, constituting about 5.8% of the state's total population, according to the 2011 Census. Despite this significant proportion, the literacy rate of the ST population in West Bengal stands at 57.93%, with a notable gender gap—male literacy at 68.17% and female literacy at just 47.71%. This educational disparity is further compounded by high dropout rates, particularly among girls, and a lack of infrastructural support, such as school proximity, language barriers, and insufficient teacher-student engagement.

While previous studies have documented the educational struggles of tribal communities, including the high dropout rates and gendered disparities in education, recent governmental initiatives aimed at promoting tribal education, particularly for girls, have yet to be fully explored. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the current trends in tribal education in West Bengal, with a specific focus on the impact of state-sponsored programs designed to enhance educational access for tribal girls. By assessing both qualitative and quantitative data, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on marginalization, development, and social equity, particularly within the context of the Vision ViksitBharat@2047 initiative, which seeks to promote inclusive growth for all segments of Indian society. Through fieldwork across four districts in West Bengal—Alipurduar, Birbhum, Purulia, and South 24 Parganas—this study will explore the

educational status of the Scheduled Tribes, with an emphasis on gender-based differences and the role of governmental programs in addressing these disparities. By examining these issues, the study will offer insights into how education can serve as a critical tool in bridging gaps, promoting social inclusion, and fostering the development of marginalized communities in the state.

Objectives

The objectives of the study on the educational status of Scheduled Tribes (STs) in West Bengal, with a focus on gender disparities and the impact of government programs, are as follows:

To Analyze the Literacy Rates:

1. To assess the overall literacy rates of Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal, with a particular emphasis on gender-based differences in literacy levels.
2. To identify and compare literacy rates across different tribal communities in West Bengal, highlighting the communities with the highest and lowest literacy rates.

To Examine the Trends in Literacy Over Time:

3. To investigate the changes in literacy rates among the tribal populations of West Bengal from 1961 to 2011, with a focus on identifying significant periods of growth or stagnation.
4. To analyze the improvement in literacy rates for both males and females over the decades, particularly examining the narrowing of the gender literacy gap.

To Explore the Impact of Government Programs:

5. To evaluate the effectiveness of state-sponsored initiatives aimed at improving education, especially for tribal girls.
6. To examine how these government programs have influenced access to education, literacy rates, and gender parity among the tribal population.

To Investigate the Socio-Economic Factors Affecting Education:

7. To explore the socio-economic conditions of tribal communities in the selected districts of West Bengal, focusing on factors such as income levels, occupation

types, and access to educational resources.

8. To analyze how these socio-economic factors contribute to or hinder educational attainment, particularly among girls.

To Identify Community-Specific Educational Patterns:

9. To document the educational status and challenges faced by different tribal communities in West Bengal, particularly in regions with high concentrations of ST populations (Alipurduar, Purulia, Birbhum, and South 24 Parganas).
10. To investigate the regional variations in educational access, quality, and outcomes among different tribal groups.

To Examine Gender-Based Barriers to Education:

11. To study the specific challenges faced by tribal girls in accessing education, including cultural, infrastructural, and societal barriers.
12. To assess how gender impacts educational outcomes and identify strategies to overcome these challenges.

To Contribute to the Discourse on Social Equity and Tribal Development:

13. To contribute valuable insights to the broader discourse on social inclusion, marginalization, and development by focusing on the education of tribal populations in West Bengal.
14. To inform policy recommendations for improving educational opportunities for marginalized communities, particularly tribal girls, in line with Vision ViksitBharat@2047 for inclusive national development.

Methodology

The methodology of the present study is based on a combination of primary and secondary data sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of the educational status of the Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal, with a particular focus on gender disparities.

Secondary Data: The secondary data for this study were primarily sourced from the Census of India 2011 and the Statistics of School Education for the year 2010-2011. These secondary sources provided demographic and educational statistics, such as literacy rates

and enrolment figures, which were essential for understanding the broader educational trends among tribal communities in the state.

Primary Data: Primary data were collected through fieldwork conducted in four districts of West Bengal, chosen from different zones of the state based on the proportion of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population. These districts include:

Alipurduar (Northern Zone): This district, with 25.62% tribal population, was selected as it has the highest concentration of STs. It is part of the Duars region, bordered by Bhutan and Assam, and characterized by forested and hilly terrains.

Purulia (Western Zone): Purulia, with 18.45% tribal population, was chosen for its strategic location in the Jungle Mahal region and its proximity to Jharkhand, which historically has a significant tribal population.

Birbhum (Central Zone): With 6.92% of the tribal population, Birbhum was selected as a representative district from the central zone. This area, bordered by Jharkhand, has a distinct socio-economic and historical context regarding tribal migration and settlement patterns.

South 24 Parganas (Southern Zone): Although this district has a relatively small proportion of STs (1.19%), it was included due to its historical importance as a migration hub for tribal communities during the early Zamindari period, particularly in the Sundarbans region, which borders Bangladesh.

Within each of these districts, one or two blocks were selected based on the highest concentration of tribal populations. From the selected blocks, villages with significant tribal populations were purposively chosen to ensure variation in tribal communities and to capture diverse educational contexts across the districts.

Data Collection: The fieldwork involved the use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Structured and unstructured schedules were employed to gather data on various aspects of education, including enrolment, literacy rates, gender disparities, school infrastructure, and community perceptions of education. This dual approach allowed for a detailed understanding of the educational experiences and challenges faced by the tribal communities, with a specific focus on gendered barriers to education.

Statistical Analysis: To analyze literacy trends over the decade (2001-2011), the study

calculated effective literacy rates based on the number of literates aged 7 years and above. The literacy growth rate was computed by comparing data from the 2001 and 2011 censuses. The effective literacy rate for specific age groups was calculated by dividing the number of literates in each age group by the total population of the corresponding age group, then multiplying the result by 100. All statistical analyses were performed using Microsoft Excel 2007, which facilitated the calculation of literacy rates, gender disparities, and literacy growth trends.

By using both primary and secondary data, the study aimed to provide a detailed and nuanced understanding of the literacy trends among the Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal, with a particular focus on the educational challenges faced by tribal women. This methodological approach allows for the identification of regional and community-specific variations in education, which are crucial for designing targeted interventions to promote educational equity for tribal populations.

Results

The results of the study reveal significant insights into the educational status of the Scheduled Tribes (ST) in West Bengal, particularly concerning literacy rates and the gender gap. According to the 2011 Census, the overall tribal literacy rate in West Bengal stands at 57.9%. This places the state just below the national average literacy rate of 58.96% for the Scheduled Tribe population in India. The male literacy rate for Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal is 68.17%, while the female literacy rate is 47.71%, indicating a clear gender disparity in education. When examining the literacy rates across different tribal communities in West Bengal, the Magh community emerges with the highest literacy rate of 88.33%, followed by the Lepcha community at 82.38%. On the other hand, the Goroit community has the lowest literacy rate, at a mere 32%.

Table 1: The Studied Area and Population

| Name of District | Name of Block | Name of Village | Name of Community | No. of Households | No. of Individuals | |
|-------------------|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----|
| Alipurduar | Madarihat | Dhumchi Rabha Basty | Rabha | 65 | 302 | |
| | | | Mech | 1 | 3 | |
| | | Titi Forest Basty | Chik Baraik | 5 | 28 | |
| | | | Kharia | 3 | 20 | |
| | | | Munda | 2 | 7 | |
| | | Kalchini | Purba Satali | Oraon | 11 | 50 |
| | | | | Tamang | 2 | 8 |
| | Chik Baraik | | | 1 | 4 | |
| | Mech | | | 20 | 83 | |
| | Munda | | | 1 | 1 | |
| | Oraon | | | 52 | 220 | |
| | Tamang | | | 2 | 10 | |
| | Santal | | | 7 | 34 | |
| | Toribari | Dukpa | Dukpa | 16 | 100 | |
| | Birbhum | Bolpur | Panchshowa | Kora | 66 | 256 |
| | | | Sirisdanga | Santal | 50 | 176 |
| | | | Md. Bazar | Santal | 29 | 152 |
| | | | Kusumkandar | Santal | 51 | 237 |
| Poradih | | | Bhumij | 34 | 136 | |
| Purulia | Manbazar II | Poradih | Bhumij | 34 | 136 | |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|------------|----------------------------|--------|------------|-------------|
| | | | Mahali | 3 | 11 |
| | | Mahalidih | Santal | 54 | 237 |
| | | Mulian | Kora | 6 | 23 |
| | | | Mahali | 14 | 61 |
| | Bandwan | Karpa | Bhumij | 39 | 164 |
| | | Haludboni | Savar | 50 | 242 |
| South 24 Parganas | Canning II | Balircharpara | Bedia | 74 | 313 |
| | Gosaba | Rajat Jubili Tipligheri | Munda | 91 | 406 |
| | Basanti | Mati Sardarpara | Bhumij | 9 | 46 |
| | | | Oraon | 59 | 251 |
| Grand Total | | | | 817 | 3581 |

This table provides the details of the communities, blocks, villages, and households studied in the four selected districts of West Bengal—Alipurduar, Birbhum, Purulia, and South 24 Parganas—along with the number of households and individuals surveyed. The study covers a diverse range of tribal communities, including Rabha, Mech, Chik Baraik, Kharia, Munda, Oraon, Santal, Kora, Bhumij, Mahali, Savar, and Tamang, among others. The total number of households surveyed is 817, with 3581 individuals included in the study. This broad sample helps provide a comprehensive view of the educational and socio-economic conditions across different tribal groups in these regions.

Gender-Based Analysis

Among tribal males, the highest literacy rate is found in the Magh community (91.57%), followed by the Limbu and Tamang communities, both with literacy rates close to 88%. The Gorait male literacy rate is the lowest at 42.21%. Among tribal females, the Magh community again leads with a literacy rate of 85.06%, followed by the Lepcha females at 77.93%. The Gorait females

have the lowest literacy rate at just 22.62%.

Literacy Trends Over Time: The literacy rate among the Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal has seen remarkable improvement over the decades. From a meagre 6.55% in 1961, it has risen to 57.93% in 2011. This upward trend is observed across both tribal males and females. A significant acceleration in literacy growth was observed between 1981 and 1991, with a near doubling of the literacy rate. For instance, the literacy rate among tribal males increased from 11.20% in 1961 to 68.17% in 2011, while tribal females saw an increase from 1.76% in 1961 to 47.71% in 2011. The gender literacy gap has also narrowed over the years. In 2001, the male-female literacy gap was 28.23%, while in 2011, it had reduced to 20.46%. Among classified ST populations, the gap reduced from 28.28% in 2001 to 20.99% in 2011, while the unclassified ST population saw an even greater reduction, from 26% in 2001 to 8.38% in 2011. The Magh community, both in 2001 and 2011, had the smallest literacy gap between males and females (8.51% in 2001 and 6.51% in 2011), showing substantial progress in bridging gender disparities.

Age-Wise Literacy Rates: The age-wise literacy data reveals that the literacy rate peaks at the age of 11 years, with a rate of 89.4% for the total population, 90.4% for males, and 88.3% for females. This pattern is consistent across both genders and different tribal groups, highlighting the critical age when formal education is accessed by children in tribal communities.

Table 2: Decadal Literacy Growth of ST Male & Female of West Bengal (2001 - 2011)

| Tribe | Male Literacy Growth (%) | Female Literacy Growth (%) |
|--------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Asur | 39.2 | 120.66 |
| Baiga | 22.32 | 85.02 |
| Bedia/Bediya | 17.63 | 38.65 |
| Bhumij | 14.84 | 65.1 |

| | | |
|--|--------|--------|
| Bhutia, Sherpa, Toto, Dukpa, Kagatay, Yolmo | 8.12 | 15.82 |
| Birhor | 47.74 | 88.2 |
| Birjia | 121.31 | 190.86 |
| Chakma | -8.02 | -8.41 |
| Chero | 18 | 26.27 |
| Chik Baraik | 14.44 | 44.89 |
| Garos | 11.79 | 24.36 |
| Gond | 10.99 | 35.4 |
| Gorait | 6.4 | 36.47 |
| Hajang | 31.84 | 51.07 |
| Ho | 24.94 | 99.63 |
| Karmali | 22.05 | 26.69 |
| Kharwar | 12.36 | 44.38 |
| Khond | -9.43 | 2.58 |
| Kisan | 12.5 | 40.65 |
| Kora | 16.6 | 59.94 |
| Korwa | 4.76 | 21.72 |
| Lepcha | 6.26 | 13.5 |
| Lodha, Kheria, Kharia | 16.74 | 60.98 |
| Lohara, Lohra | 6.64 | 21.15 |

| | | |
|-----------------------|-------|--------|
| Magh | 0.29 | 2.74 |
| Mahali | 19.37 | 65.95 |
| Mahli | 24.32 | 66.8 |
| Mal Pahariya | 47.96 | -71.72 |
| Mech | 6.94 | 22.51 |
| Mru | 39.27 | 82.98 |
| Munda | 24.32 | 74.32 |
| Nagesia | 57.77 | 154.73 |
| Oraon | 22.97 | 60.65 |
| Parhaiya | 15.16 | 48.83 |
| Rabha | 27.56 | 62.56 |
| Santal | 15.35 | 61.27 |
| Sauria Paharia | 27.64 | 89.08 |
| Savar | 37.05 | 96.43 |
| West Bengal | 18.5 | 61.59 |
| Unclassified | 24.2 | 98.86 |
| Total (as per census) | 18.8 | 63.67 |

This table presents the decadal literacy growth rates for both male and female Scheduled Tribe (ST) populations in West Bengal between 2001 and 2011. The data shows significant variations across different tribal communities, with some groups such as Birjia, Nagesia, and Savar experiencing exceptional female literacy growth rates, while others like Magh and Khond show lower or even negative growth in literacy, particularly among females. The overall literacy

growth in West Bengal for males and females was 18.50% and 61.59%, respectively, while unclassified tribes saw an even higher increase in female literacy (98.86%). The table illustrates the gender disparities and varying trends in literacy growth across the diverse tribal communities of the region.

Community-Wise Literacy Growth: The study also explores literacy growth among different tribal communities from 2001 to 2011. Overall, the literacy rate for the Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal increased by 33.48% over the decade. The Birjia community saw the highest growth, with a remarkable increase of 143.36%. Among males, the Birjia community experienced a growth of 121.31%, while the females of the same community saw a staggering increase of 190.86%. Other communities, such as the Nagesia and Asur, also saw substantial literacy growth among females, with increases of 154.73% and 120.66%, respectively. However, the Chakma community experienced a decline in literacy of 10.17% over the decade. In terms of gender-specific growth, the Birjia females saw the highest literacy growth, followed by the Nagesia and Asur females. On the other hand, the Mal Pahariya community saw a significant 47.96% increase in male literacy, while female literacy decreased by 71.72%.

Socio-Economic Context: The fieldwork covered 3581 individuals from 817 households across 16 villages in the selected districts. The households, particularly in South 24 Parganas, had a relatively low economic status, with monthly incomes ranging from Rs. 3000 to Rs. 5000. The majority of the population relied on agricultural labour, with adult males mostly employed as day labourers, while females primarily engaged in household activities. A few communities, such as the Savar and Mahali, continued to pursue traditional practices like hunting and gathering, and craft-making. Other tribes in the Sundarbans, such as the Munda and Bhumij, relied on fishing and crab collection. Despite these socio-economic challenges, the study reveals that a significant portion of the population speaks tribal languages, including Santali, Rabha, Kurukh, Sadri, Mech/Bodo, and Dukpa, which reinforces the cultural diversity and importance of preserving indigenous languages alongside formal education.

Analysis

The study on the educational status of Scheduled Tribes (STs) in West Bengal, based on data from the 2011 Census and fieldwork, reveals several key findings related to literacy rates, gender disparities, and community-specific variations in education. Below are the major findings:

Overall Tribal Literacy Rate in West Bengal: The literacy rate for the Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal stands at 57.93%, which is lower than the state's overall literacy rate of 77.08%. However, it is still higher than the national tribal literacy rate, which is 58.96%. Among the tribal population, male literacy is significantly higher at 68.17%, compared to female literacy at only 47.71%. This demonstrates a notable gender gap in education.

Tribal Community-Specific Literacy Rates: The literacy rate varies significantly across different tribal communities. Among the 14 communities studied, the Magh community has the highest literacy rate (88.33%), followed by the Lepcha community (82.38%). In contrast, the Gorait community shows the lowest literacy rate, at just 32%.

Male literacy rates are highest among Magh males (91.57%), followed by Limbu and Tamang males, both near 88%. The Gorait males have the lowest male literacy rate (42.21%).

Female literacy rates are highest among Magh females (85.06%), followed by Lepcha females (77.93%). The lowest female literacy rate is again observed in the Gorait community (22.62%).

Improvement in Literacy Over Decades: Significant improvements in tribal literacy have been observed over the decades. The literacy rate for the tribal population in West Bengal has increased from just 6.55% in 1961 to 57.93% in 2011, showing a steady upward trend. The increase has been particularly rapid between 1981-1991, nearly doubling the literacy rate for both males and females. Tribal males' literacy rate increased from 11.20% in 1961 to 68.17% in 2011, while females' literacy rate grew from a mere 1.76% in 1961 to 47.71% in 2011.

Gender Gap in Literacy: The gender gap in literacy has shown significant improvement in recent years. The gap between male and female literacy among the tribal population decreased from 28.23% in 2001 to 20.46% in 2011. For the unclassified ST population, the gender gap reduced even more sharply, from 26% in 2001 to 8.38% in 2011. However, some communities still exhibit a wide gender disparity, such as the Bedia community, which shows a 24.60% gap in 2011.

Age-wise Literacy Rates: The age-wise analysis of literacy rates for the Scheduled Tribe population in West Bengal reveals that literacy rates peak at age 11, with nearly 90% of individuals in this age group being literate. The average literacy rate for the total population is 50.3%, with males at 59.1% and females at 41.5%. This demonstrates the early attainment of

literacy in tribal children but also indicates that older individuals lag in literacy compared to younger age groups.

Decadal Literacy Growth (2001-2011): The decadal literacy growth among ST populations in West Bengal varies considerably across different communities. Some communities such as Birjia (121.31% male, 190.86% female growth), Nagesia (57.77% male, 154.73% female growth), and Savar (37.05% male, 96.43% female growth) have shown exceptional improvement. Conversely, the Chakma and Khond communities experienced a decline in literacy rates for both males and females, with Chakma showing a decrease of about 8% in literacy for both genders.

Community-Specific Educational Patterns

South 24 Parganas: Communities like Bedia and Munda from the Sundarbans region exhibit high dependence on traditional practices like fishing, crab collection, and agricultural labour. These communities also have a high proportion of households with homestead land but limited access to formal education.

Purulia and Birbhum: Tribes like Santal, Munda, and Bhumij show varied patterns of literacy, with some communities making significant strides in educational attainment, while others continue to face challenges in terms of access and quality of education.

Alipurduar: In this district, tribes such as Rabha and Mech have shown relatively higher literacy growth, with a strong presence of education-related initiatives contributing to this improvement.

Impact of Government Schemes: Government initiatives aimed at promoting tribal education, especially for girls, have contributed significantly to narrowing the gender gap in literacy. Schemes targeting female education, financial incentives, and the provision of scholarships have shown positive results, particularly in areas where gender disparities were previously more pronounced.

Conclusion

The study highlights a positive trend in tribal education in West Bengal, with significant improvements in literacy rates, especially among females. However, challenges remain, including community-specific disparities and the need for continued support to bridge gaps in access to education and quality of learning. Efforts aimed at improving the educational status of

tribal populations, particularly girls, have shown promising results, but further targeted interventions are required to ensure sustainable development in this regard.

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