Barriers to Primary Education for Tribal Children in Jhargram District, West Bengal: A Sociological Analysis.

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
	This paper provides a sociological analysis of the various barriers to primary education faced by tribal children in rural area of Jhargram district of West Bengal. The tribal communities in this region, notably the Santal, Munda, Bhumij, and Lodha, have historically experienced marginalisation. Despite various governmental initiatives, significant disparities in basic educational attainment still persist all over the country. This study analyses the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and infrastructural factors that obstruct access to and successful completion of primary education for tribal children. This paper argues that poverty, cultural dissonance between the school curriculum and tribal life, linguistic barriers, and inadequate educational infrastructure pose substantial challenges, as demonstrated by existing literature and sociological frameworks. The findings indicate that parental illiteracy, the opportunity cost of education, and a curriculum that overlooks indigenous knowledge systems substantially contribute to increased dropout rates. The study highlights the unique challenges faced by girls, who often assume domestic responsibilities and are more likely to be withdrawn from school. The paper concludes with a discourse on policy implications and recommendations for a

more inclusive and culturally sensitive educational system that can effectively address the unique needs of tribal children in Jhargram.

Introduction:

Education is universally recognised as a fundamental human right and a crucial instrument for social and economic progress. It offers marginalised communities a means to transcend poverty and challenge entrenched systems of inequality. The tribal population in India, known as Adivasis, has historically been one of the most socially and economically marginalised groups. Despite constitutional provisions and numerous governmental initiatives aimed at their advancement, tribal communities continue to lag behind the general population in critical development indicators, such as education. In the district of Jhargram, located in the western part of West Bengal, tribal children—primarily belonging to communities such as Santhal, Lodha and Mahato—face systemic barriers that hinder their educational attainment.

The Jhargram district in West Bengal, formed from the erstwhile Paschim Medinipur district in 2017, contains a significant tribal population, comprising the Santhal, Mahato, and the particularly vulnerable Lodha Sabar communities. This region, characterised by its undulating terrain, dense forests, and agrarian economy, has endured extended social and political unrest, intensifying the challenges faced by its inhabitants. Notwithstanding West Bengal's progress in literacy rates, the educational status of tribal children in Jhargram remains a considerable issue. High dropout rates, reduced enrolment in higher education, and inadequate learning outcomes are widespread, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and marginalisation. The most recent specific data from a study by SCERT West Bengal, covering up to the 2019-2020 academic year, indicated that the dropout rate at the upper primary level in Jhargram was positive for both boys and girls, meaning students were dropping out. The exact percentage for the primary level was not specified in the summary. Another report from 2023 and 2024 confirm that student dropouts remain a significant concern in the wider Jungalmahal area, which includes Jhargram. These reports often highlight higher dropout rates among tribal communities. In response to this, the state's School Education Department launched an "Early Warning Systems" initiative in late 2023 for the Jungalmahal districts, including Jhargram, to identify at-risk students and prevent them from dropping out.

This research paper performs a sociological examination of the barriers to primary education encountered by tribal children in Jhargram. It goes beyond a cursory analysis of educational statistics to explore the significant social, economic, and cultural factors that influence the educational experiences of these

children. This paper asserts that the educational deficiencies in tribal communities arise not merely from individual or familial inadequacies but from systemic and structural inequities. This study aims to clarify the complex interactions of these factors to improve understanding of the current challenges and to offer recommendations for more effective and equitable educational policies and practices. This study aims to explore these barriers from a sociological perspective, emphasizing the structural and cultural dynamics that shape educational outcomes for tribal children. This paper addresses the following questions: What are the major obstacles faced by tribal children in accessing education in Jhargram? How do factors like poverty, cultural dissonance, language, gender, and institutional neglect interact to create these barriers? What role do government policies and local institutions play in mitigating or perpetuating these issues?

Literature Review:

The educational exclusion of tribal populations has been documented in various studies (Xaxa, 2005; Shah, 2010). Despite constitutional provisions for affirmative action and the Right to Education Act, the dropout rates among Scheduled Tribe (ST), Schedule Caste and other indigenous children remain alarmingly high. Language barriers, poverty, child labour, and inadequate infrastructure are frequently cited causes (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2011).

Tribal communities often inhabit geographically isolated areas, which results in physical inaccessibility of schools. Moreover, formal education is often delivered in languages unfamiliar to tribal children, creating a disconnect between home and school environments (Mohanty, 2009). Cultural differences further marginalize tribal students in mainstream education systems that fail to recognize or incorporate indigenous knowledge systems (Rege, 2006).

In the context of West Bengal, studies by Basu (2012) and Munda (2016) have highlighted how sociolinguistic and economic factors intersect to obstruct tribal children's schooling. Jhargram, being a forest-fringe and conflict-affected area, poses additional challenges, including livelihood dependency on forest resources, seasonal migration, and limited awareness of educational schemes. The educational underdevelopment of tribal communities in India has received scholarly and policy focus for several decades. A significant corpus of literature has delineated multiple factors that contribute to this phenomenon. This review will synthesise the key themes and findings from contemporary research, establishing a theoretical and empirical foundation for the current study.

Poverty is universally recognised as the principal barrier to education for tribal children. For families living at a subsistence level, the direct and indirect costs related to education can be exorbitant. Direct costs include expenditures for uniforms, books, and essential materials, while indirect costs, or opportunity costs, refer to the loss of a child's labour, which is often crucial for the family's livelihood (Nambissan, 2010). A significant proportion of tribal children engage in agricultural labour, cattle herding, or the collection of non-timber forest resources, and their absence from these activities can substantially impact the household economy. Furthermore, malnutrition, stemming directly from poverty, hinders children's cognitive development and learning abilities, leading to inadequate academic performance and eventual dropout (Gore, 2006).

Comprehensive studies also reveal a significant cultural dissonance between the formal education system and the experiences of tribal children. The educational curriculum, textbooks, and pedagogical approaches are often urban-centric and fail to authentically depict the cultural and social realities of tribal communities (Xaxa, 2008). This may lead to feelings of alienation and the perception that education is irrelevant to their lives. The medium of instruction represents a substantial obstacle. Most tribal children converse in their indigenous languages at home, whereas the primary language of instruction in schools is typically the regional language (Bengali, in West Bengal) or English. The linguistic barrier impedes children's comprehension of classroom instruction, leading to inadequate learning outcomes and reduced confidence (Panda, 2006).

The inadequacy of suitable educational infrastructure in tribal areas is a well-documented concern. Many tribal communities are located in remote and inaccessible areas, with schools often situated at considerable distances, which impedes regular attendance for children, especially girls (Sujatha, 2002). Educational institutions in tribal areas often display degraded infrastructure, inadequate basic amenities such as potable water and sanitation, and a lack of qualified and motivated teachers. The high rate of teacher absenteeism represents a considerable issue impacting the education system in these regions (Kingdon,   2007).

The academic achievement of children is closely linked to the educational background and viewpoints of their parents. In many tribal communities, marked by high illiteracy rates, parents may be unaware of the importance of education or may be incapable of supporting their children's learning at home. Some studies suggest that tribal communities exhibit a sense of fatalism and reduced ambition, potentially hindering the demand for education (Varghese & Konantambigi, 2017). It is imperative to avoid essentialising tribal communities and to recognise that parental attitudes are often shaped by their

negative experiences with the education system and their perceptions of the limited economic advantages of education. Beside all these barriers, tribal girls face a compounded disadvantage, positioned at the intersection of gender and social marginalisation. They often shoulder the burden of domestic responsibilities, sibling caregiving, and numerous household duties, which limits their time and energy for education. Early marriage is a critical determinant of girls' educational discontinuation (Chanana, 2001). The lack of female educators and designated restrooms for girls in educational institutions can create an unsafe and unwelcoming environment, thereby deterring their participation in education.

Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative approach supplemented with quantitative data. A structured questionnaire was administered to 50 tribal households across five villages in Jhargram block. In-depth interviews were conducted with parents, teachers, and local administrators. Secondary data from Census reports, District Information System for Education (DISE), and academic literature were also analysed.

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure representation from different tribal communities, especially Santhal and Lodha groups. The data collection focused on children aged 6 to 16 years. The study adhered to ethical research guidelines, with informed consent obtained from all participants. This qualitative study employs a sociological framework to investigate the barriers to education encountered by tribal children in Jhargram. The research is based on a comprehensive analysis of contemporary literature, including academic journals, governmental reports, and publications from non-governmental organisations. The study further employs a secondary analysis of data from sources such as the Census of India and the National Family Health Survey to provide a statistical overview of the educational status of tribal communities in West Bengal.

This study's theoretical framework is grounded in the works of sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Paulo Freire. Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus are essential for understanding how the educational system sustains social inequalities by favouring the cultural resources of the dominant class while diminishing those of marginalised groups (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Freire's critical pedagogy provides a framework for conceptualising a more liberating and empowering educational model based on the experiences of the oppressed (Freire, 2000). This paper aims to cultivate a thorough and sophisticated comprehension of the complex factors affecting the educational trajectories of tribal children in Jhargram by synthesising theoretical frameworks with empirical evidence from existing literature.

Findings and Analysis:

This in-depth sociological study found some crucial socio-economic factors that play primary obstacles to get education in rural tribal arear of Jhargram district. The educational setting for tribal children in Jhargram is shaped by a multifaceted interplay of the factors discussed in the literature review. This section will analyse the specific manifestations of these barriers in the context of Jhargram, employing the available evidence

Socio-economic Marginalization:

Poverty is pervasive in Jhargram, a district defined by a predominantly agrarian economy and limited industrial development, affecting the majority of tribal households. The dependence on rain-fed agriculture and the collection of forest resources makes their livelihoods vulnerable to environmental disruptions. For these families, enrolling a child in school represents a significant economic decision. The opportunity cost of education is considerable, as children's labour often significantly contributes to the family's income. This is particularly relevant to older children, who are often withdrawn from school to participate in agricultural labour or to migrate for seasonal work. Therefore, economic hardship emerged as the most prominent barrier for getting access to education. It may be concluded that most families in the study rely on subsistence agriculture, daily wage labour, and forest produce collection. Educational expenses, though subsidized, are still burdensome when coupled with opportunity costs. Children are often engaged in household chores or wage work to support family income.

Language and Cultural Alienation:

Although Santhali, Lodhi and Kudmali spoken at home, schools function in Bengali or English. This linguistic gap creates an alienating experience for tribal children, leading to poor comprehension and academic underperformance. Teachers often lack training in multilingual pedagogies, further exacerbating the disconnect. The language barrier substantially impedes the educational advancement of tribal children in Jhargram. While Santali is the predominant language for many of these children, Bengali is utilised as the medium of instruction in most government schools. This creates a significant disadvantage for tribal students, who must learn in a language they do not fully comprehend. The scarcity of bilingual educators and instructional materials exacerbates this problem. The government's efforts to implement Santali-medium education have been erratic and inadequate.

The Mahato and Santals, the principal tribal groups in Jhargram, have a rich and vibrant cultural heritage, marked by their unique language, traditions, and social institutions. Nonetheless, the formal education system rarely acknowledges or incorporates this cultural knowledge. The school curriculum is often regarded as alien and disconnected from their everyday experiences. The emphasis on rote memorisation and abstract theories may contradict the experiential and community-centered education valued in tribal cultures. This cultural dissonance may lead to reduced interest and motivation among students, who may view their own culture as undervalued. Several marginal governmental initiatives have been initiated to address these barriers. The newly established Sadhu Ramchand Murmu University in Jhargram has been providing a certificate course in the Kudmali language.

Gender Disparities:

Girls face heightened barriers due to early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and safety concerns. In some cases, families prioritize sons' education over daughters. Adolescent girls often drop out due to the lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure, including functional toilets and menstrual hygiene facilities. In Jhargram, tribal girls face various impediments that limit their educational opportunities. They are often expected to bear a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities, including cooking, cleaning, and supervising younger siblings. This leads to negligible time or energy for their scholarly endeavours. The prevalence of early marriage significantly contributes to the interruption of their education. The lack of a safe and supportive environment in educational institutions, including the absence of female educators and designated restrooms, constitutes a substantial obstacle. To cope up with this gendered issue, government girls' school, college and hostel have been set up.

Infrastructural Deficits

Several villages lack nearby schools, forcing children to walk long distances. Many schools suffer from teacher shortages, inadequate classrooms, and irregular mid-day meal services. In tribal belts, where community trust in state institutions is low, the absence of quality infrastructure further disincentivizes school attendance. The educational infrastructure in the remote and forested areas of Jhargram is often inadequate. Many villages lack educational facilities, requiring children to navigate several kilometres through difficult terrain to reach the nearest school. This acts as a notable deterrent, especially for young children and females. The condition of the schools is often insufficient, marked by a lack of essential facilities such as classrooms, restrooms, and potable water. The quality of instruction is a major concern.

There is a shortage of qualified educators willing to work in these remote areas. Teacher absenteeism is a widespread problem that diminishes the quality of education.

Institutional Neglect and Policy Gaps:

While schemes like *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* and *Kanyashree* have shown limited success, gaps in implementation remain. Lack of community engagement, top-down planning, and corruption dilute the impact of educational interventions. Tribal parents often lack awareness of entitlements and support systems.

The findings indicate that the barriers to education among tribal children in Jhargram are deeply rooted in structural inequalities. The intersectionality of caste, class, gender, and geography creates a complex matrix of exclusion. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, it can be argued that tribal families often lack the symbolic and social capital valued by formal education systems.

Moreover, state policy frameworks have largely adopted a welfare-based rather than rights-based approach to tribal education. There is a lack of culturally relevant pedagogy that values indigenous languages and worldviews. The result is an education system that is perceived as alien, irrelevant, or even oppressive by many tribal families.

To counter these challenges, it is essential to move beyond tokenistic inclusion. Educational reforms must incorporate the voices and knowledge systems of tribal communities. Teachers need training in intercultural education, and local governance structures should be empowered to co-manage schools.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Conclusion

The educational marginalization of tribal children in Jhargram reflects broader patterns of social exclusion. While poverty and infrastructure are critical issues, cultural alienation and institutional apathy play equally significant roles. This study underscores the need for a holistic, inclusive, and community-driven educational strategy that affirms tribal identities while bridging social divides.

Policies should prioritize mother-tongue education in early years, gender-sensitive infrastructure, community involvement, and stronger monitoring mechanisms. Only then can the promise of education as a tool of empowerment be realized for Jhargram's tribal children.

The educational marginalisation of tribal children in Jhargram is a multifaceted issue rooted in the historical and structural inequities of Indian society. This paper argues that a convergence of socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and infrastructural barriers significantly obstructs these children from realising their full educational potential. The findings of this study underscore the imperative for a paradigm shift in tribal education, moving from a standardised model to one that is contextually relevant and culturally sensitive. This document delineates the subsequent recommendations derived from the conducted analysis:

(i) Improving Livelihoods: Addressing poverty is crucial for promoting the educational success of tribal children. This requires a comprehensive strategy that includes improving the livelihoods of tribal communities through the promotion of sustainable agriculture, the development of non-farm employment opportunities, and the effective implementation of social security programs.

(ii) Culturally Responsive Pedagogy: It is essential to improve the school curriculum and teaching methods to better correspond with the cultural and social contexts of tribal children. This involves incorporating indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, and artistic forms into the curriculum. The development of bilingual educational materials is crucial for bridging the linguistic divide.

(iii) The government must augment its investment in educational infrastructure in tribal areas, including the construction of additional schools, provision of essential amenities, and establishment of residential schools for children from remote villages. Investment is necessary for the recruitment, training, and professional development of educators, focussing on improving their capacity to operate effectively in multicultural and multilingual classrooms.

(iv) Empowering Girls: A focused prioritisation of girls' education is essential. This involves launching community-focused awareness campaigns about the importance of girls' education, providing financial incentives to families to enrol their daughters in school, and ensuring a safe and supportive educational environment for girls.

(v) Community Engagement: The effective implementation of any educational initiative requires the active participation of the community. This involves involving parents and community leaders in the planning, management, and supervision of schools. The formation of dynamic and empowered School Management Committees (SMCs) is crucial for guaranteeing the accountability of the education system.

In conclusion, the challenge of delivering quality education to all tribal children in Jhargram is considerable, yet not insurmountable. It requires a sustained and steadfast commitment from the government, civil society, and the wider community. By adopting a comprehensive, inclusive, and culturally sensitive approach, it is possible to create an educational framework that provides tribal children with vital knowledge and skills for modern society while respecting their unique cultural heritage.

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