



Research Article

Issue of dropout in higher education departments: A study SC and ST students in Alipurduar, West Bengal

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the issue of student dropout among Scheduled Tribe (ST) students at the higher secondary level (grades 11-12) in Alipurduar district, West Bengal, India. Data were collected from four Bengali-medium schools using a qualitative survey method that included school records, questionnaires, and interview schedules. The analysis revealed that the dropout rate of tribal students increased sharply from 2018-2019 to 2020-2021 and decreased from 2022-2023 to 2023-2024. Notably, the dropout rate of tribal students was found to be higher than that of non-tribal students. The main reasons for dropout were identified as language barriers and poor economic status. Other associated factors include long distance between home and school, participation of students in household chores, lack of conducive learning environment in schools, and lack of awareness about the value of education among parents and the community.

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1. INTRODUCTION

India is characterized by a significant number of tribal communities, with diverse eco-cultural, socio-economic and geographical diversity. As per the 2001 census, Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute 8.14% of the total population, which is about 84.51 million. In West Bengal, tribals constitute 2% of the population, comprising 32 distinct tribal groups. Their livelihood strategies are diverse, including hunting-gathering, shifting cultivation, settled agriculture and participation in contract labour. In 2001, the literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes in India was about 42.10%, which is a significant shortfall compared to the national literacy rate of 61.8%. Educational disparities were particularly pronounced in West Bengal, where the overall tribal literacy rate was 20.92%, and the number of Scheduled Tribe women was 12.5%, which is alarmingly low. The tribal population is recognized as one of the most deprived and marginalized groups in terms of educational attainment. As a result, various developmental programmes and policy measures have been implemented since India's independence. The provision of education to tribal children is considered a crucial component of the national strategy not only to fulfil the constitutional obligation for equality, but also for the overall development of the tribal community. Despite sustained national efforts to ensure the constitutional right to equality and development, tribal groups remain educationally backward. This is attributed to the interplay of external factors (e.g., socio-economic constraints) and internal factors (e.g., psychological and structural challenges faced by first-generation learners). Tribal education thus faces numerous obstacles, which are systematically categorized as external and internal constraints. Although education is fundamentally a tool for human development, its benefits have historically been disproportionately enjoyed by the socio-economically advantaged sectors of Indian society. The comprehensive development of the nation requires the vigorous development of its vulnerable sections, including the tropical tribal communities, who often face unique challenges. Global efforts, reflected in India's policies (e.g., NPE – 1986; POA – 1992; NCF – 2005; RTE – 2009), have focused on ensuring compulsory primary education for all, irrespective of caste, gender or religion. However, ST children often exhibit weaker basic skills than their peers. Historically, economically and socially, the Scheduled Tribes have been significantly backward. About 8% of the population belongs to the Scheduled Tribes, which number about 80 million. Most of the tribal people live in rural areas and have a common regional language within their group, with distinct psychological, cultural, social, economic and political characteristics that set them apart from the mainstream education system. Communication barriers between children and teachers are a major obstacle in using Bengali as the medium of instruction in primary level schools.

2. METHODOLOGY

Primary Data Collection (First-hand Information)

The focus of the investigation was to collect primary data information collected directly from the source to capture the qualitative and personal aspects of the problem. Interviews and Conversations: I spoke directly with students and their parents.

These personal interactions were crucial for gathering rich, relevant information about the personal and family reasons behind dropout. This method helped the study go beyond mere statistics and understand the human element the specific struggles, decisions, and beliefs that contribute to low educational retention. Structured Tools: The use of prepared questionnaires and formal interviews ensured the systematic collection of both measurable data (e.g., family size, income, distance to school) and in-depth qualitative responses. These structured tools ensured that the data could be compared and reliably analyzed across different respondents.

Secondary Data Collection (Existing Data)

To provide institutional and statistical background, secondary data - already recorded and available - were collected by visiting some schools. These school visits were necessary for the following purposes: To collect official records on admission, attendance and dropout rates in different grades. To contextualize the primary findings by observing the educational environment, availability of resources and general infrastructure of the schools serving the tribal community.

3. OBJECTIVE

- To study the reasons of dropout of tribal at the higher secondary level and college-
- To examine the educational facilities available to the tribal students in higher education in Alipurduar, West Bengal.
- To Study the impact of socio-economic status.
- To examine the language barrier.
- To examine psychological problems.
- Unemployment.
- Distance to schools.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Educational Facilities: India is a moving nation, a developing country striving to improve every aspect of life and one of the fastest changing areas is education. Our current school system is undoubtedly better than it was in the 1990s, with updated curricula and greater access to resources.

Such progress is a source of pride, yet a closer look reveals that this development is not reaching everyone equally, creating a deep divide in educational opportunities. The main problem arises when we look at specific, geographically challenging areas like Alipurduar district. Here, many students, especially students from tribal communities, are woefully deprived of the benefits of modern education. These students face significant barriers that prevent them from accessing the same quality of facilities as their peers in urban or well-connected areas. The unique environment of the district is a major part of the problem. Alipurduar is defined by its landscape – surrounded by rivers and dense forests. This natural isolation makes it extremely difficult to set up the infrastructure required for modern communication. As a result, network connectivity in many parts of the district is extremely poor or non-existent. In today's world, the lack of network connectivity makes it almost impossible to access online learning opportunities. Students

elsewhere may benefit from digital learning resources, virtual classrooms, and vast online libraries, but students in Alipurduar are completely isolated. This digital divide immediately puts them at a major disadvantage, depriving them of a crucial tool for contemporary learning and skill development. The geographical barrier has essentially created an educational barrier. Moreover, a significant problem lies within the schools themselves. When teachers visit these schools, a striking imbalance is consistently observed: the number of students is too high, while the number of teachers is too low. This stark student-teacher ratio means that teachers are completely overwhelmed. They cannot give individual attention to students, effectively manage a classroom, or properly assess and support the unique learning needs of dozens of children at once. The quality of education suffers greatly in such a crowded and inadequate environment. A teacher trying to manage a large class simply cannot provide the high-quality, personalized learning that a child needs to truly succeed. The combination of all these factors—geographical isolation, poor network connectivity, lack of modern online facilities, and a dire teacher shortage—has one clear, devastating consequence: the number of children dropping out of school is increasing. When children don't have the tools they need to learn, when the physical school environment is challenging, and when they feel they are not being taught effectively, they lose motivation and eventually drop out of the system.

Socio-economic conditions: The lives of the tribal communities in Alipurduar are deeply affected by their poor socio-economic conditions. Simply put, most people here have no stable or secure means of earning an income, making daily life a constant struggle. Many tribals in the area rely on fishing for a living. This type of work is often unpredictable, as the amount of fish they catch can vary greatly depending on the weather and season, meaning their income is never guaranteed. Other members of the community earn their living through a variety of labor, which often involves low-paid, difficult, and irregular daily wage work. These limited and fragile sources of income mean that the entire community lives on the brink of poverty. As a direct result of this financial struggle, the lives of the people of Alipurduar are incredibly difficult. They face enormous challenges just trying to ensure basic needs: getting enough rice to eat, buying the necessary clothing, and having safe, permanent shelter. It is a daily struggle to meet these basic needs. This deep-rooted financial instability has a particularly acute and heartbreaking impact on the district's youth. Tribal students are forced to drop out of school early. This is not because they do not value education, but rather because their families are not financially stable. When a family is desperate for money to survive, children often have to step up and become self-sufficient. They are forced to join the workforce or do household chores instead of continuing their education. This tragic necessity means that their prospects for a better future are diminished. By dropping out of school, they are forgoing their best chance to break the cycle of poverty. The immediate need for income today forces them to forego the long-term stability

of an education, thereby ensuring that the next generation will likely face the same harsh economic realities. To truly help tribal students, the deep poverty that keeps them out of the classroom must first be addressed.

Language Barrier: A major reason for the problems and frequent dropouts of students in Alipurduar district is the language barrier. This problem starts with the local people. Alipurduar is home to several tribal communities including Mek, Ravha, Adivasi, Santal and Nepali. These groups speak their own distinct, mother tongues within their families and local communities, which creates a strong linguistic environment at home that is separate from the school environment. The real problem arises because there are not enough suitable schools for these students. In particular, there is a lack of tribal and Santal medium schools. As a result, children are forced to enroll in schools where instruction is in Bengali or English. For a child who speaks only the tribal language at home, entering a classroom where the teacher speaks Bengali or English is like stepping into a foreign land. This creates a huge communication gap. These language differences directly harm the learning process. Students cannot communicate well with their teachers – they cannot easily ask questions, explain what they do not understand, or participate in discussions. Worse, they are unable to understand what teachers are teaching well. If a student cannot understand the words used by the teacher, they will likely not understand the complex concepts taught in subjects such as math or science. The effort they put into translating words deprives them of the effort they need to understand the lesson. This constant struggle has a serious consequence: students are not able to receive proper education. They fall behind because they miss the basic knowledge shared in the classroom. This creates a large gap in their learning compared to students who speak Bengali or English at home. Over time, going to school becomes a source of frustration, confusion, and failure instead of a path to success. When a child constantly feels disconnected from lessons and unable to communicate with their teachers, they lose their motivation. Therefore, one of the main reasons for the alarmingly high dropout rate among students from the tribal community in Alipurduar is the language barrier. To address this, the education system needs to find ways to bridge this language gap, either by opening more schools to teach students in their mother tongue or by providing robust programs that help them transition smoothly to the mainstream languages of instruction. Addressing this issue is crucial to providing all children in the district with a fair chance of a full education.

Psychological Problems: The basic argument is that because previous generations were not exposed to education, their thinking was not developed to fully appreciate its long-term value. This is not a comment on their intelligence, but on their attitude and ambition towards formal education. When adults have not personally experienced the benefits of higher education—such as better jobs, wider opportunities, or a change in social status—they may not see it as an essential goal. This

limited educational perspective of parents and community leaders is then thought to have the same effect on their children. Children often internalize the beliefs and priorities of their environment. If they constantly see that higher education is not being pursued, discussed, or highly valued by people they like, they are less likely to aspire to it themselves. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that is passed down through generations. As a result, the thinking of students in this area is not interested in higher education. They may be content to finish basic education or drop out of school to do immediate, entry-level work. They lack ambition to pursue college, university or specialized vocational training because it does not seem necessary or realistic for their future. They have low vision, often a lack of academically successful role models, and a community culture that does not strongly push for higher education. This creates a vicious cycle. Low educational attainment in the community limits the thinking and aspirations of children, which ensures that the next generation will also have low educational attainment, which will keep the community educationally lagging behind. Breaking down this mental barrier requires more than just building schools; it involves demonstrating the real, tangible benefits of higher education through successful local examples and changing the community's overall mindset and belief system about what their children can achieve. This shift in thinking is essential to fostering genuine aspirations for higher education and breaking the intergenerational cycle of limited educational horizons.

Unemployment: Education has traditionally been seen in India as the most reliable path to stability, often symbolizing a highly coveted government job. For students from tribal communities, who may face economic and social disadvantages, education is a crucial tool for upward mobility and securing a better future for their families. However, the reality in Alipurduar is different. Those who invest years of effort and resources in their studies, graduate only to face unemployment or the inability to secure stable employment in their intended field. They see their educated peers struggling, which sends a deeply depressing message to those still in school.

This outcome creates a crisis of motivation. Young tribal students see the evidence educated people are still unemployed—and they reasonably conclude that the effort and expense of continuing their education is not worth the risk. Why study for years if the promised reward (a stable job) is not guaranteed? As a result, these students are dropping out of their education. This decision is understandable, but dangerous given the circumstances. By dropping out, they severely limit their own potential and perpetuate a vicious cycle: unemployment leads to a lack of educational investment, which in turn perpetuates unemployment and limits the overall development of tribal communities. To break this cycle, communities need not just more schools, but more real, quality job opportunities and learning pathways that are directly linked to marketable skills, thereby restoring students' faith in the value of their hard work.

Distance to Schools: A key problem in Alipurduar is the small number of educational institutions. Since schools and colleges are so sparsely located, many students have to travel long distances from their homes to attend classes. This physical distance is compounded by severe transportation problems. In many rural or remote areas of the district, reliable public transportation is scarce, expensive, or non-existent. Students often have to walk, cycle, or rely on shared, informal transportation methods, which can be time-consuming and unsafe. The article specifically mentions river crossings as an additional hazard. This means that students may have to cross natural barriers, especially during the rainy season, which can make daily travel dangerous or even impossible. When colleges are far away, the financial strain on students' families becomes overwhelming. While tuition fees are manageable, the daily cost of transportation quickly adds up. For low-income families, especially those from rural backgrounds, these recurring expenses – bus fares, shared taxi fares or ferry fees – can become an unbearable burden on their limited budgets. Furthermore, long commutes force students to travel for hours, taking time off from their studies, helping their families, or earning a living. This creates a difficult economic calculation for families: transportation costs combined with the opportunity cost of the student's time make it financially impossible to continue their education. This combination of distance, difficult terrain and financial pressure is leading directly to an increase in dropout rates. The problem is so severe that it affects not only the students themselves but also their families, who are often described as “unable to attend college regularly.” This is likely indicative of the inability of families to consistently support student attendance due to their increasingly dire financial circumstances. This crisis is a classic example of how infrastructural constraints perpetuate the cycle of poverty. When access to education is limited by geography and cost, the poor are disproportionately affected. To ensure equitable access to education, the district needs strategic solutions: investing in local school and college infrastructure to reduce distances and improving safe, affordable transportation connections, such as subsidized school buses or improved roads and bridges, so that geographic location is no longer a determinant of a student's educational future.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be said that the problem of dropout among tribal (SC and ST) students in Alipurduar district is a serious social and educational problem. Many students from the tribal community are unable to continue their studies and leave school before completing higher secondary or higher education. This not only affects their personal development but also slows down the overall educational progress of the community. In the past, the dropout rate among tribal students was much higher than it is today. Various factors such as poverty, lack of educational awareness, language barrier, long distance between home and school and limited educational facilities forced many students to discontinue their studies. Families often relied on their children

to contribute to household chores or to work as daily wage laborers, making it difficult for them to continue their education. However, the situation has gradually started to improve in recent years. The government has launched several schemes and welfare programs to help students from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Benefits such as scholarships, free textbooks, mid-day meals, hostels and other educational support programmes have helped many students to stay in the education system. As a result of these initiatives, the overall dropout rate has started to decline compared to the previous years. Despite these improvements, a clear gap still remains between rural and urban areas. The dropout rate is still high in rural and remote areas of Alipurduar. The main reasons for this are poor infrastructure, lack of transport facilities, shortage of teachers and limited access to digital learning resources. Students from remote villages often have to travel long distances to reach school or college, which creates additional challenges for them and their families. Therefore, it is important to understand that improving the education of tribal students is necessary not only for the development of a particular community, but also for the progress of the entire society and the nation. When tribal students receive proper education and opportunities, they can contribute to economic growth, social development and equality in the country. Therefore, continued efforts on the part of the government, educational institutions and society are essential to further reduce the dropout rate and ensure equal educational opportunities for all.

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