



TRIBAL EDUCATION IN INDIA: SOCIO-CULTURAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND ECONOMICAL CONSTRAINTS

Saroj Sahu¹,
Partha Sarathi Mallik²ⁱ,
Sadhujuan Bankira¹,
Dipanjali Sahu³,
Suruchi Sahoo¹

¹Assistant Professor,
School of Education,
Gangadhar Meher University,
Sambalpur, India

²Professor and Head,
School of Education,
Gangadhar Meher University,
Sambalpur, India

³Post-Graduate Teacher,
Education,
Belpahar Higher Secondary School,
Belpahar, Jharsuguda,
India

Abstract:

Tribal education is one of the most emerging policy issues throughout India. It has been documented that the dropout rate of tribal children is 24% and their poor academic performance is a key concern. Despite various government initiatives aimed at improving and uplifting tribal education and living conditions, such as mid-day meals, school uniforms and scholarships, the dropout rate continues to rise. These measures, though well-intended, have not fully resolved the underlying issues, which include insufficient infrastructure, lack of parental involvement and curriculum that may not be culturally sensitive to tribal children. The present results highlighted that multiplicity of factors, including lack of access to quality schools, poverty, parental involvement, gender stereotypes and language barriers, have a detrimental effect on rates of enrolment and retention among the Scheduled tribes. The paper has concluded with some possible suggestions. This study would be useful both for academic research and for the policy makers to restructure and organized the curriculum.

Keywords: tribal education, social exclusion, first generation learner, gender stereotypes

ⁱ Correspondence: email psmallik@gmuniversity.ac.in

1. Introduction

In the world, India has the second largest tribal population, accounting for 8.6% of the scheduled tribe communities after the African country (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2019-20; Velusamy, 2021). According to Article 342, there are over 705 distinct group tribes spread over different states and union territories of the country. Predominantly, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, etc. are the states where most tribal communities reside. Tribal communities and children from Scheduled Tribes face challenges and disadvantages due to historical and geographical factors (NEP-2020). Usually, the tribal people live in isolated areas such as hills, forests and seas (Rupavath, 2016; Velusamy, 2021). Scheduled Tribes are living a miserable life without enough resources and have a lot of issues and problems, such as economic problems, illiteracy, unemployment, housing and nutrition problems (Vinu, 2021; Velusamy, 2021). The government has introduced various policies and initiatives, including constitutional provisions like Article 46 and the National Education Policy 2020, to promote inclusive education and address the educational needs of tribal communities. Kothari Commission (1964-66) emphasized the need to pay special attention to the education of the children from backwards classes such as Scheduled Tribe, Scheduled caste and de-notified communities. However, after that, the tribal literacy rate is 52.24% as per the 2011 census. And the dropout rate of tribal education is 24% at the secondary level (The Times of India, 2023). A report indicated that at the primary level, 10.6% children from scheduled tribes had enrolled, and later, the enrolment rate decreased to 6.8% in higher secondary level (U-DISE, 2016-17).

From the above points, it can be inferred that multiple constraints hinder the progress of tribal education. This research papers discuss these multiple constraints to tribal education in India, examining the interplay among cultural, social, institutional and economic factors. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing holistic and context-sensitive educational polices that can foster meaningful learning opportunities for tribal communities, thereby promoting social justice and national development.

1.1 Background of the Study

India is the homeland of a diverse range of tribal communities, each with its unique cultural, social and economic characteristics. These communities have historically lived in geographically isolated regions, often relying on traditional practices for their livelihoods. Despite their rich cultural heritage and significant contributions to environmental conservation, tribal communities face numerous challenges, particularly in the sphere of education. Education plays a vital role in shaping the social and economic development of any community. It positively impacts individuals, societies, and nations, making it one of the most valuable investments for development. By enhancing human capital, education plays a crucial role in fostering a country's economic growth (Abuya *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, higher levels of education are associated with improved health outcomes, reduced inequality and civic engagement (UNESCO, 2021). Educational disparities are a major concern, as literacy rates among tribal populations are 52.24%

(Census, 2011). However, tribal communities in India face numerous constraints that hinder their access to and participation in education, such as economic hardships, widespread gender stereotypes, illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, child labour, inadequate housing, poor nutrition, infrastructure, culturally insensitive curriculum, social exclusion, etc. These constraints can be broadly categorized into cultural, social, institutional and economic factors.

2. Cultural and Social Constraints

The traditional lifestyles, indigenous knowledge systems, language and cultural barriers often create a disconnect between tribal students and the mainstream education system. Tribal communities have distinct languages, traditions and views that differ from mainstream society (Xaxa, 2001). Tribal communities encounter a culturally insensitive curriculum, identity crisis, social exclusion, gender stereotypes, lack of parental involvement, first-generation learners, transport facilities and unavailability of health and nutrition facilities.

2.1 Cultural Insensitive Curriculum

A culturally relevant curriculum nurtures a sense of pride and connection while providing tribal youth with a well-rounded education that reflects their real-life experiences, fostering sustainable development grounded in their cultural heritage. The mainstream educational curriculum sometimes does not reflect the culture, traditions, and values of tribal communities. This lack of cultural relevance can hamper tribal students and make education seem less meaningful or important to them (Kumar, 2024). For example, in the secondary school, British rule and Mughal rule are taught, but the indigenous fighter Tulasi Munda is underrepresented in colleges and universities.

2.2 Identity Crisis

Exposure to a curriculum that focuses on mainstream culture can create an identity crisis among tribal children, as they struggle to balance their cultural heritage with the demands of the education system. An identity crisis refers to the conflict that tribal students experience when navigating between their indigenous cultural heritage and the dominant culture promoted by formal educational systems. Tribal communities in India have distinct languages, traditions and ways of life, which clash with the mainstream educational institutions. This dissonance can lead to confusion, low self-esteem and academic disengagement (Mahapatra, 2014).

2.3 Social Exclusion and Isolation

Social discrimination and exclusion are significant barriers to the educational advancement of tribal children in India. These challenges manifest in various forms such as prejudices, bullying and neglect from peers, teachers and the school principal. As a result, they feel low self-esteem, demotivated and demoralised (Nambissan, 2009). Tribal students frequently face discrimination and exclusion from their peers and even from

teachers. This social exclusion can lead to feelings of inferiority and a lack of motivation to attend school. Tribal students frequently face bias from non-tribal peers who may view them as inferior or backwards due to their cultural background, dialect or appearance. This can result in verbal abuse, bullying and social isolation. It is also reported that teachers, often coming from non-tribal backgrounds, may harbor conscious or unconscious biases, leading to differential treatment. Tribal students are perceived as less capable, resulting in lower expectations and limited academic support (Sujatha, 2002). It is found that the scheduled tribe students feel shy and less social with other children. The scheduled tribe students are not as active as other children; they usually occupy the backlines in the classroom (Sarkar, 2023).

2.4 Gender Stereotypes

In many tribal communities, patriarchal norms and gender roles restrict educational opportunities for girls. Girls are often expected to take on household responsibilities such as cooking, caring for younger siblings (Sujatha, 2002) or get married at a young age, limiting their chances of continuing their education. It is also reported that concerns about the safety and security of girls while travelling to and from school can also prevent parents from sending their daughters to school, especially in remote or conflict-prone areas. In addition to this, the scarcity of female teachers in tribal schools exacerbates the problem. Female teachers often act as role models and provide a sense of security and encouragement for female students (Kumar, 2019).

2.5 Parental Involvement

It is reported that the literacy rate of the tribal communities was 58.96% which is less than the overall literacy rate of India, i.e., 72.99% (Census, 2011). It is also reported that low socio-economic families have limited time and resources to actively engage in their children's education due to work obligations (Singh & Banerjee, 2019). Thus, due to a lack of education and work obligation, parents do not focus on their children's education, which negatively affects children's academic motivation, self-esteem and disengagement of children in education. It is claimed that the tribal students whose parents are highly educated support their children's education. On the other hand, the students whose parents are less educated have no ambition for their children's education or upward mobility (Jayawal *et al.*, 2003). It is reported that most of the scheduled tribe students' parents undervalue the educational activities of their children (Sarkar, 2023).

2.6 Less Attention to the First-Generation Learners

First-generation learners are those who have access to education at school for the first time in their entire generation. This lack of educational background leads to low academic support at home. Without proper guidance and motivation from their families, tribal students face challenges in keeping up with their studies (Swain, 2016). As the tribal students are first-generation learners, they feel a low level of motivation (The New Indian Express, 2025) and are unable to understand the teaching learning process, which leads to absenteeism (Banerjee, 2012).

2.7 Transport Problem

The road facilities are inadequate, and a large number of villages are still unconnected with the network of the existing road system (Odisha Heritage, 2020). A report has claimed that 1136 villages out of the 3637 tribal villages have not been connected with motorable roads in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh (The Hindu, 2020). Road facilities in many tribal-dominated areas remain severely inadequate, posing a significant barrier to educational access and equity. A considerable number of tribal villages are still disconnected from the national or state road networks, making transportation to school and colleges difficult and, in some cases, nearly impossible. This lack of connectivity not only affects students' regular attendance but also limits the educational opportunities, resources and support services.

2.8 Health Problems and Existing Health Care Facilities

Tribal people face poor health and nutrition, common diseases like malaria, skin disease, and viral infections, as they live in an unhealthy environment and isolated areas, where medical facilities are not sufficiently available (Ambily, 2023). It is found that 90 families of Ganthiguda and Ucheipoda villages are using polluted water, which causes frequent illness (Odishatv.in, 2025). The health and nutritional status of tribal children in India significantly affects their educational outcomes. Many tribal communities live in geographically isolated areas with limited access to healthcare services and essential amenities (Odishatv.in, 2025), which leads to large health issues that obstruct school attendance and academic performance. It is also claimed that due to poverty and lack of access to balanced diets, tribal children suffer from malnutrition, high rates of stunted growth, underweight conditions, micronutrient deficiency, etc. These health conditions negatively affect cognitive development, concentration and learning ability.

3. Economical Constraints

Tribal communities in India face severe economic challenges that significantly impact their access to education, due to continuous economic exploitation by non-tribal groups (Nandini, 2021). Moreover, economic challenges like poverty and the need for children to contribute to household livelihoods force many tribal families to deprioritize education, leading to high dropout rates (Swain, 2016). It is evident that scheduled tribe people are unable to fulfil their basic needs like food, proper clothes and enough shelter. The condition of these tribes is poor, so they cannot afford a good school for their children, and they are forced to send them to work as child labour so they can learn some money for their livelihood. Research indicates that low socio-economic status families often struggle to provide essential resources such as quality education, health care and nutritious food to their children. Limited access to these resources can negatively affect scheduled tribe children's cognitive development, physical health and academic achievement. In the present study, the economic constraints include poverty and child labour, economic marginalization, cost of education, seasonal migration for work, etc.

3.1 Poverty and Child Labour

Tribal families face drastic financial hardships, leading them to prioritize basic livelihood needs over education. Many parents prefer sending their children to work rather than school to contribute to the family's income. Due to widespread poverty, children in tribal communities are expected to have low family income. They engage in agriculture and the collection of forest produce. This results in child labour becoming a common phenomenon among tribal children, depriving them of essential educational opportunities (Desai & Patel, 1981).

3.2 Economic Marginalization

Economic exploitation by non-tribal groups has further marginalized tribal communities. Due to their geographic isolation and lack of access to income-generating opportunities, many tribal families trapped in poverty, seasonal employment, subsistence agriculture and dependance on forest produce are their primary means of livelihood, which offer little financial stability (Sarkar, 2023).

3.3 Cost of Education

Although education in many government schools and colleges is free, the additional costs associated with education, such as expenses for uniforms, books, stationery and transportation, are a cause which is a barrier for tribal families. These hidden costs discourage parents from enrolling their children or sustaining their education (The State of Higher Education Report, 2023).

3.4 Seasonal Migration for Work

As the tribal peoples reside in a geographically dispersed area and education does not yield any immediate economic return, the tribal parents prefer to engage their children in remunerative employment, which supplements the family income. Education was the secondary issue for the scheduled tribes population, as they usually struggled to fulfil their basic livelihood needs due to continuous economic exploitation by non-tribals. Many tribal families migrate seasonally in search of work, which significantly disrupts their children's education (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2012). As a result, children are forced to drop out of school either temporarily or permanently. This lack of a stable educational environment not only hampers their academic performance but also limits their future opportunities (Marandi and Patel, 2022). Additionally, these children face challenges in adapting to different school systems and curricula when they re-enrol.

4. Institutional Constraints

Institutional constraints hinder tribal education by creating physical, cultural, and social obstacles that limit access, quality, and relevance. These barriers include inadequate infrastructure, lack of qualified teachers and teachers' absenteeism, language barriers and inadequate schooling facilities.

4.1 Lack of Trained Teachers from the Tribal Community and Teachers' Absenteeism

Due to a shortage of teachers, tribal schools are unable to attract students and create interest among tribal students in studying. Without proper training, they will not get enough knowledge, which is the teaching method used to teach a particular group of students. In the remote areas, the teacher's absenteeism is a regular phenomenon, and this largely affects the quality of education. A rigid system of formal schooling and teacher-centered instruction is also a constraint for tribal education. The traditional teacher centered approach in formal education often does not cater to the needs and preferences of tribal students. Students were typically disinterested in co-curricular and extracurricular activities offered by the schools as they did not cater to tribal tastes (Sarkar, 2023). The lack of well-trained teachers in tribal areas negatively affects students' engagement and interest in education. Many teachers use inadequate teaching methods which does not meet the needs of tribal students.

4.2 Language Barriers

Language plays a critical role in education. Tribal children have limited contact with the state language, and they prefer to communicate in their native language (Ingole & Mandal, 2025). Usually, government schools use the state language for teaching and communication, which is most often not familiar to a tribal child at the pre-primary and primary levels. It is reported that tribal children of Odisha have faced language-related problems during the schooling period, and they fail to understand and communicate in the regional language with their classmates and teachers (Pradhan and Pattanaik, 2011; UNICEF, 2024). As a result, inadequate use of tribal language or difficulty in the use of tribal languages forces students to drop their courses at a very early stage of their education. It has also been observed that sometimes teachers from other cultures fail to appreciate the uniqueness and specialty of tribal culture (Dash, 2019; Rakshikha, 2022). This creates a social distance between teachers and the students in the tribal areas. An empirical finding shows that the non-tribal teachers are typically found to be dissatisfied with their job in the tribal dominated areas (Sarkar, 2023).

4.3 Inadequate Schooling Facilities

Poor infrastructure in tribal schools remains a major concern. Due to a lack of essential amenities such as clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, electricity, and classrooms, the effective teaching and learning process. In tribal areas, most schools do not provide basic amenities such as toilets, drinking water, electricity and adequate classrooms for proper teaching. Vijayalaxmi (2004) conducted a study on identifying the problem of tribal students in secondary school. The finding of the study reveals that the residential schools are very poor in infrastructural facilities, and have poor non-meal programs. It is found that some schools have no bathroom facilities for girls. The students use the outside field for a toilet (bathroom). As a result, it creates a problem for girls' students, especially during menstruation and prevents them from attending the school (Bhagavatheewaran *et al.*, 2016).

5. Conclusion

The education of tribal communities in India faces a complex interplay of cultural, social, economic and institutional constraints that significantly hinder their academic progress and overall development. Cultural alienation, language barriers and lack of culturally sensitive curricula hamper the formal education of tribal students. Social exclusion, patriarchal norms, and limited parental involvement further exacerbate the issues, especially for female students. Economically, widespread poverty, the cost of education and the need for children to contribute to household income negatively affect tribal education. Institutionally, inadequate infrastructure, untrained teachers and absenteeism, etc., are the barriers to tribal education. To overcome these barriers, a holistic approach is necessary. Educational reforms must prioritize culturally responsive curricula, enhanced teacher training and community engagement to make learning meaningful and accessible for tribal students. Improving infrastructure and promoting gender-sensitive policies are equally essential. Addressing economic challenges through targeted welfare programs and livelihood initiatives can further help families prioritize education. Ultimately, fostering collaboration among government bodies, educators, and tribal leaders will be key to creating an inclusive education system that empowers tribal communities.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that no such potential conflicts of interest are associated with the present paper.

About the Author(s)

Dr. Saroj Sahu is working as an Assistant Professor in Education (Contractual) at the School of Education, Gangadhar Meher University, Sambalpur, Odisha. His area of research is Educational Psychology and Educational Research. His ORCID profile is <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5696-4763>

Dr. Partha Sarathi Mallik is a Professor of Education and Head of the School of Education at Gangadhar Meher University, Odisha, India. His academic and research interests include instructional designs, educational measurement and evaluation, sociology of education, parenting practice of socio-culturally excluded groups, and examination reformations. For more insights into his academic contributions and research, visit his ORCID profile at <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8311-2125>.

Sadhujan Bankira is an Assistant Professor of Education at Gangadhar Meher University, Sambalpur, Odisha, India, and is currently pursuing his Ph.D. He completed his M.A. in Education in 2019 and earned his M.Phil. Degree from Gangadhar Meher University in 2022. His research activities include presenting papers at national and international conferences and seminars, and publishing research papers in various national and international journals. His areas of research interest include Educational Psychology, Educational Technology, and Teacher Education. Visit his ORCID profile at <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3988-5400>

Dr. Dipanjali Sahu is a Post-Graduate Teacher in Education at Belpahar Higher Secondary School, Belpahar, Jharsuguda, India. Her research areas are parenting practice, sociology in education and educational psychology. Her ResearchGate account is <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Dipanjali-Sahu>

Suruchi Sahoo is an Assistant Professor in English Pedagogy at the School of Education, Gangadhar Meher University, Sambalpur, Odisha, India. Her research area is school education challenges concerning the English language teaching-learning process, methods and challenges, educational psychology and sociology of education. Her works of academic and research interests are available in her ORCID profile <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8110-2476>.

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