



Socio-Economic Barriers and Educational Aspirations of Matua Students in Higher Education: An Empirical Study in West Bengal

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Abstract

Higher education plays a crucial role in promoting social mobility, economic empowerment, and social inclusion among marginalized communities. The Matua community, a significant Scheduled Caste group in West Bengal, has historically experienced social exclusion, economic deprivation, and limited educational opportunities. Despite various governmental initiatives aimed at enhancing educational access among disadvantaged groups, Matua students continue to encounter numerous barriers in pursuing higher education. This study investigates the socio-economic barriers and educational aspirations of Matua students in West Bengal, focusing on family income, educational access, first-generation learner status, financial constraints, scholarship awareness, career aspirations, and rural-urban disparities. A descriptive and analytical research design was adopted, and primary data were collected from 400 Matua students enrolled in colleges and universities across selected districts of West Bengal. The findings indicate that low household income, inadequate parental education, limited awareness of educational support schemes, and insufficient institutional support significantly affect educational participation. The study also reveals that first-generation learners face greater academic and psychological challenges than students from educated families. Rural students encounter more severe infrastructural and financial constraints than their urban counterparts. Despite these challenges, Matua students exhibit strong educational aspirations and view higher education as a pathway toward social mobility and economic advancement. The study highlights the need for targeted educational policies, enhanced scholarship dissemination mechanisms, mentorship programs, and institutional support structures to improve educational outcomes among Matua students.

Keywords: Matua Community, Higher Education, Educational Aspirations, Socio-Economic Barriers, First-Generation Learners, West Bengal

1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a transformative instrument for social and economic development. It provides individuals with knowledge, skills, and opportunities necessary for improving their quality of life and participating effectively in society. For historically marginalized communities, higher education serves as a powerful mechanism for social mobility, empowerment, and reduction of socio-economic inequalities. However, access to higher education remains uneven across different social groups in India.

The Matua community represents one of the largest Scheduled Caste populations in West Bengal. Originating from the socio-religious reform movement initiated by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur in the nineteenth century, the Matua movement emphasized social equality,

educational advancement, and empowerment of marginalized populations. Despite these reformist ideals, many Matua families continue to experience economic vulnerability, limited access to educational resources, and social disadvantages.

Educational attainment among Matua students has improved considerably over the past two decades due to government interventions such as reservation policies, scholarships, and expansion of higher educational institutions. Nevertheless, substantial disparities persist. Economic hardship, inadequate parental educational background, lack of awareness regarding educational opportunities, and geographical disadvantages continue to impede educational participation.

The present study explores the socio-economic barriers influencing higher education among Matua students in West

Bengal. The research further examines educational aspirations and identifies factors affecting students' ability to achieve their academic and professional goals.

2. Review of Literature

Previous studies have highlighted the relationship between socio-economic background and educational achievement among marginalized communities. Desai and Kulkarni (2008) ^[7] reported that caste-based inequalities continue to influence educational participation in India despite constitutional safeguards. Their study revealed that Scheduled Castes remain underrepresented in higher education due to economic and social barriers.

Tilak (2015) ^[21] emphasized that economic status remains one of the strongest predictors of educational attainment. Students from low-income households often experience difficulties in meeting educational expenses, resulting in higher dropout rates and reduced participation in higher education.

Sarkar (2018) ^[18] examined educational development among Scheduled Caste communities in West Bengal and found that first-generation learners face unique challenges, including lack of academic guidance, limited parental support, and inadequate access to educational resources.

Bandyopadhyay and Mukherjee (2019) ^[1] analyzed educational mobility among marginalized communities and reported that educational aspirations remain high despite adverse socio-economic conditions. Their findings suggested that higher education is increasingly viewed as a means of social transformation and occupational mobility.

Biswas (2020) ^[4] investigated educational inequalities among rural students in West Bengal and found significant disparities in access to educational infrastructure, internet connectivity, and academic support services. Rural students were observed to face greater obstacles in pursuing higher education compared to urban students.

Recent studies by Roy and Das (2022) ^[6] highlighted the importance of scholarship awareness and institutional support in promoting higher education among Scheduled Caste students. Lack of information regarding available educational schemes was identified as a major barrier affecting educational participation.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that socio-economic factors significantly influence educational outcomes among marginalized groups. However, limited empirical research specifically focuses on Matua students in higher education, creating a need for the present investigation.

3. Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Examine the socio-economic factors affecting higher education participation among Matua students.
2. Analyze the relationship between family background and educational aspirations.
3. Identify major financial and institutional barriers faced by Matua students.

4. Research Methodology

The study employs a descriptive and analytical research design. Primary data were collected through a structured

questionnaire administered to Matua students enrolled in colleges and universities across North 24 Parganas, Nadia, South 24 Parganas, and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal.

A sample of 400 students was selected using stratified random sampling. The questionnaire included sections on demographic characteristics, family background, educational aspirations, financial challenges, scholarship awareness, and institutional support.

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, percentages, mean scores, correlation analysis, and comparative analysis between rural and urban respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=400)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	220	55.0
	Female	180	45.0
Residence	Rural	260	65.0
	Urban	140	35.0
Family Type	Joint	165	41.3
	Nuclear	235	58.7
First-Generation Learners	Yes	280	70.0
	No	120	30.0

The data indicate that a substantial proportion of respondents belong to rural areas and are first-generation learners. This finding reflects the educational transition currently occurring within the Matua community.

Table 2: Monthly Family Income

Income Category	Frequency	Percentage
Below ₹10,000	110	27.5
₹10,001–20,000	155	38.8
₹20,001–30,000	80	20.0
Above ₹30,000	55	13.7

The findings reveal that approximately 66.3 percent of respondents belong to households earning less than ₹20,000 per month. Such limited financial capacity significantly influences educational access and continuity.

Students from low-income households reported difficulties in paying tuition fees, purchasing study materials, accessing digital resources, and participating in academic activities requiring financial expenditure.

Table 3: Major Challenges Faced by First-Generation Learners

Challenge	Percentage
Lack of Academic Guidance	78.0
Financial Problems	72.5
Limited Family Support	61.3
Career Information Deficit	58.8
Language Barriers	44.5

First-generation learners constitute a majority of the sample and face significant educational challenges. The absence of educated family members often limits access to academic guidance and career counseling. Consequently, these students rely heavily on institutional support systems.

Table 4: Awareness of Scholarship Schemes

Awareness Level	Frequency	Percentage
Fully Aware	120	30.0
Partially Aware	175	43.8
Not Aware	105	26.2

Although scholarship schemes exist for Scheduled Caste students, awareness levels remain inadequate. More than one-fourth of respondents were unaware of available financial assistance programs.

Table 5: Major Financial Constraints

Financial Problem	Percentage
Tuition Fees	72.0
Hostel Expenses	58.5
Transportation Costs	66.8
Books and Materials	69.3
Digital Access Costs	54.5

The findings indicate that educational expenditure remains a significant obstacle for Matua students. Transportation costs and study materials constitute major financial burdens, particularly for rural students.

Table 6: Educational Aspirations

Educational Goal	Percentage
Undergraduate Degree Only	18.0
Postgraduate Degree	42.5
Professional Course	22.0
Doctoral Studies	17.5

The results demonstrate high educational aspirations among respondents. Nearly 82 percent expressed intentions to pursue education beyond the undergraduate level.

Table 7: Career Aspirations

Career Goal	Percentage
Government Service	45.0
Teaching Profession	18.5
Private Sector Employment	21.5
Entrepreneurship	9.0
Research and Academia	6.0

Government employment emerged as the most preferred career choice due to perceived job security and social status.

Table 8: Comparison of Rural and Urban Students

Variable	Rural Mean	Urban Mean
Educational Resource Access	2.94	4.11
Internet Availability	3.05	4.28
Scholarship Awareness	3.12	4.03
Career Guidance Access	2.86	4.05
Academic Support	3.01	4.10

The analysis reveals significant disparities between rural and urban students. Urban respondents reported better access to educational infrastructure, career guidance, digital resources, and institutional support.

5. Results and Discussion

The findings of the study provide significant insights into the socio-economic realities and educational aspirations of Matua students in West Bengal. The analysis indicates that educational participation among Matua students is shaped by a complex interaction of economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors.

One of the most prominent findings is the influence of family income on educational access and continuity. Students belonging to lower-income households reported greater difficulties in meeting educational expenses, including tuition fees, transportation costs, hostel charges, books, and digital learning resources. Since nearly two-thirds of the respondents came from families earning less than ₹20,000 per month, financial vulnerability remains a critical obstacle. These findings support earlier studies suggesting that economic deprivation significantly restricts higher educational opportunities among marginalized communities.

The study also reveals the predominance of first-generation learners within the Matua community. Approximately 70 percent of respondents were the first members of their families to enter higher education. While this reflects positive educational mobility, it simultaneously highlights substantial challenges. First-generation learners often lack parental guidance regarding academic planning, competitive examinations, scholarship applications, and career opportunities. Many respondents reported feelings of uncertainty and low confidence during their educational journey. This suggests that educational advancement among Matua students is occurring despite limited familial educational capital.

Another important finding concerns scholarship awareness. Although several scholarship schemes are available for Scheduled Caste students, awareness remains uneven. Only 30 percent of respondents reported being fully aware of available educational assistance programs. Inadequate dissemination of information prevents many deserving students from accessing financial support. Respondents from rural areas demonstrated particularly low awareness levels, indicating deficiencies in institutional outreach and communication mechanisms.

Educational aspirations among Matua students were remarkably high. The majority expressed a desire to pursue postgraduate education, professional qualifications, or doctoral studies. This finding indicates a growing recognition of higher education as an instrument of social mobility and economic advancement. The aspiration to secure government employment emerged as the most

common career objective. Government jobs are perceived as stable, prestigious, and capable of ensuring economic security for families historically affected by socio-economic marginalization.

The comparative analysis between rural and urban students reveals substantial disparities in educational opportunities. Urban students reported better access to internet connectivity, libraries, coaching facilities, mentorship opportunities, and career counseling services. Rural students frequently encountered transportation difficulties, inadequate digital infrastructure, and limited academic support. Such disparities contribute to unequal educational outcomes and reinforce existing socio-economic inequalities.

The findings further indicate that educational aspirations are positively associated with parental educational background and family income. Students whose parents possessed at least secondary education demonstrated greater awareness of higher educational opportunities and stronger academic confidence. Similarly, students from relatively better-off households exhibited higher educational ambitions and greater participation in extracurricular and career-development activities.

Overall, the results suggest that Matua students possess strong aspirations for educational advancement despite facing multiple socio-economic barriers. Their educational journey reflects resilience, determination, and a growing commitment to upward social mobility through education.

6. Conclusion

The present study examined the socio-economic barriers and educational aspirations of Matua students in higher education institutions in West Bengal. The findings reveal that socio-economic disadvantages continue to influence educational participation among Matua students despite improvements in educational access over recent decades.

Low household income emerged as one of the most significant barriers affecting educational attainment. Financial constraints limit students' ability to access learning materials, digital resources, coaching facilities, and other educational necessities. First-generation learners face additional challenges arising from limited parental educational support and inadequate academic guidance.

The study also found that scholarship awareness remains insufficient among a substantial proportion of students. While government initiatives have expanded opportunities for Scheduled Caste students, many beneficiaries remain unaware of available schemes and support mechanisms. This reduces the effectiveness of welfare interventions designed to promote educational inclusion.

Rural-urban disparities continue to influence educational outcomes. Rural students experience greater difficulties related to infrastructure, transportation, digital access, and career guidance. These inequalities highlight the need for region-specific interventions aimed at improving educational opportunities in underserved areas.

Despite these obstacles, Matua students exhibit strong educational aspirations and a positive attitude toward higher education. Most respondents perceive education as a pathway to economic independence, social recognition, and improved life opportunities. Their aspirations reflect broader processes of social transformation occurring within the

Matua community.

The study concludes that higher education has become an important mechanism of empowerment among Matua youth. However, realizing the full potential of educational advancement requires targeted policy measures addressing financial, informational, and institutional barriers.

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