



Educational Inclusion and Persistent Inequality: The Scheduled Tribe Community and Education in West Bengal

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Abstract

Education is a major route to mobility, dignity, and citizenship for historically marginalized communities. In West Bengal, the educational condition of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) community is shaped not only by poverty, but also by geography, language, gender, and uneven institutional reach. This article examines the educational position of the ST community in West Bengal through a review of Census 2011, the Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India, UDISE+ data, AISHE findings, policy documents, and selected scholarly studies. The analysis shows that educational participation has expanded over time, yet structural inequality persists. ST literacy in West Bengal remains below the state average, and the gender gap is especially severe. Recent school data also show that dropout rises sharply at the secondary stage. The article argues that the core issue is no longer access alone, but meaningful participation, retention, transition, and culturally relevant learning. Language mismatch, first-generation schooling, household insecurity, weak institutional support, and gendered burdens continue to shape disadvantage. The paper concludes that a more effective educational strategy for ST communities in West Bengal must combine mother-tongue-sensitive pedagogy, stronger secondary retention, residential and transport support, reliable scholarship delivery, and locally grounded planning.

Keywords: Scheduled Tribe, Tribal Education, Educational Inequality, Secondary Schooling, Mother Tongue, Educational Policy

1. Introduction

The educational condition of the Scheduled Tribe community in West Bengal is central to any serious discussion of equity in education. The issue concerns not only school access, but also whether historically marginalized communities can remain in educational institutions, learn successfully, and progress without losing language, dignity, or social identity^[1-3].

State records identify 40 recognized tribal groups in West Bengal, while Census 2011 recorded the ST population at 5,296,963, about 5.8% of the state's population^[1]. This diversity matters because the ST category is administratively unified but educationally varied. Different communities are shaped by different languages, regional locations, livelihood patterns, and histories of institutional contact.

The scale of disadvantage becomes visible in literacy data. According to the Statistical Profile of Scheduled Tribes in India, West Bengal's overall literacy rate was 76.3%, but ST literacy in the state was only 57.9%^[3]. The gender gap was particularly sharp: ST male literacy was 68.2%, while ST

female literacy was 47.7%^[3]. These figures show that tribal educational inequality in West Bengal is simultaneously social, regional, and gendered.

This article examines the educational condition of the ST community in West Bengal through official statistics, policy documents, and academic literature. It argues that although access has widened, the deeper problems of retention, transition, language, and institutional responsiveness remain unresolved^[3-7].

2. Methods and scope

This article is a qualitative, review-based research paper built on secondary data and interpretive analysis. It uses Census 2011 educational tables, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs' statistical profile, UDISE+ school education data, parliamentary records on dropout rates, AISHE findings on higher education, the National Education Policy 2020, and selected peer-reviewed studies on tribal education in West Bengal and India^[2-7].

The use of secondary sources is appropriate because the educational condition of the ST community is already

documented across several official datasets, but these sources are often read separately. This paper brings them together into a single analytical argument suitable for journal discussion [5, 6, 8].

The scope of the paper is limited to education within West Bengal, but it also uses selected all-India evidence when such evidence helps interpret state-level patterns. The article does not claim to present original fieldwork. Its contribution lies in organizing existing evidence into a clearer explanation of why educational inequality persists even when school expansion and welfare provision appear to have improved access.

3. Historical and social context of tribal education in West Bengal

The educational history of tribal communities in West Bengal has been shaped by long-standing exclusion. Colonial land policies, forest control, labor extraction, displacement, and uneven regional development affected the social conditions within which tribal communities approached formal schooling. In many areas, the school entered tribal life as an external administrative or missionary institution rather than as a community-rooted space [8, 9].

Across India, ST literacy has improved significantly over time, reaching 59.0% by 2011 [3]. Yet progress has not erased inequality. In West Bengal, ST literacy remained below the state average, and the gap for tribal women remained severe [3]. Studies focusing on West Bengal confirm this. Biswas and Sharma found continuing disparities between ST and non-ST populations in school enrolment and literacy [8]. Research on the Santal community in Birbhum also shows that educational improvement remains constrained by economic hardship, weak local support, and unequal access to educational resources [9].

4. Present educational pattern: access, retention, and transition

The current educational position of the ST community in West Bengal presents a mixed picture. Access to elementary education has improved over time due to school expansion and welfare schemes. However, improved access has not automatically produced sustained progression. The most serious weakness appears in retention and transition, especially at the secondary stage [4, 5].

Parliamentary data based on UDISE+ show that for 2024-25 the dropout rate for ST students in West Bengal was 2.5% at primary, 5.1% at upper primary, and 28.4% at secondary level [5]. This pattern is significant because it suggests that initial entry into school is no longer the principal barrier; rather, the system fails to retain many students once they approach adolescence and higher academic demands.

Several factors help explain this sharp secondary-stage decline. Distance to higher classes often increases after primary schooling. Household labor pressure grows. Hidden costs such as transport and private tutoring become more important. The curriculum also becomes more abstract and examination-oriented, which can deepen disadvantage for first-generation learners. For girls, these pressures are compounded by domestic responsibilities and safety concerns [10, 11].

The situation in higher education shows both progress and limitation. AISHE 2021-22 reported that ST students constituted 6.3% of total higher education enrolment in India, and that ST enrolment nationally had risen to 27.1 lakh [6]. Yet higher education depends on successful school completion. In West Bengal, the sharp drop at the secondary stage suggests that many tribal students are filtered out long before they can benefit from higher educational expansion [5, 6].

5. Structural barriers behind educational inequality

The first major barrier is economic insecurity. Many tribal households in West Bengal rely on unstable wage labor, seasonal migration, forest-linked work, or informal occupations. Even when tuition is not a major burden, transport, books, uniforms, examination costs, and lost labor time can discourage continuity. For poor households, the future returns of education may appear uncertain compared with immediate livelihood needs [9-11].

The second barrier is language. For many tribal children, especially among Santali-speaking populations, the language of school does not fully match the language of home. This affects comprehension, classroom participation, confidence, and progression. Research on Santali and Ol Chiki has shown that mother tongue and script are not only cultural markers but also educational resources [12]. The National Education Policy 2020 also emphasizes the importance of mother tongue or local language in the early years [7].

The third barrier is gender. Tribal girls experience layered disadvantage created by poverty, regional underdevelopment, domestic work, sibling care, limited mobility, and safety concerns. National research on SC and ST girls shows that weak infrastructure, low support, and restrictive gender norms often obstruct educational continuation [10, 11]. West Bengal's low ST female literacy rate reflects these cumulative barriers [3].

The fourth barrier is institutional weakness. A school may exist physically without being educationally enabling. Tribal learners often require hostels, transport support, scholarship assistance, multilingual materials, and teachers trained for culturally diverse classrooms. Where such support is absent, formal enrolment may coexist with educational exclusion [8, 9].

6. Policy response: achievements and limitations

Policy intervention in tribal education has been substantial in formal terms. The pre-matric scholarship scheme for ST students is especially important because it targets Classes IX and X, precisely the stage at which dropout becomes most severe [13]. Residential schooling has also been promoted through Eklavya Model Residential Schools, which aim to provide quality education to tribal students from Classes VI to XII, particularly in remote or underserved areas [14]. West Bengal has established EMRS institutions under this framework [15].

Yet policy presence does not always translate into policy effect. Scholarships can fail when awareness is poor, applications are difficult, or disbursement is delayed. Residential institutions benefit only a limited share of students. Language-sensitive teaching remains uneven, and many local schools continue to operate without sufficient

support structures. Policies therefore often reduce disadvantage at the margins without transforming the wider educational experience of the tribal population [5, 7, 9, 13].

The National Education Policy 2020 provides a broader framework by emphasizing inclusion, multilingualism, foundational learning, and equitable access [7]. However, its significance depends on region-specific implementation. In West Bengal, the diversity of tribal communities demands planning that is not only inclusive in principle but locally differentiated in practice.

7. Discussion

The evidence suggests that the educational challenge of the ST community in West Bengal can no longer be framed solely in terms of access. The expansion of primary schooling has mattered, but the deeper crisis lies in continuity, transition, cultural relevance, and quality. The central question is whether the system allows tribal children to remain, learn, and progress on equitable terms [5, 7].

A more effective educational strategy requires at least four shifts. First, secondary retention must become the central policy priority, because this is where the educational pipeline is breaking most sharply [5]. Second, multilingual and mother-tongue-sensitive pedagogy should be treated as a core educational necessity rather than a symbolic concession [7, 12]. Third, tribal girls need targeted interventions that combine safety, financial support, mentoring, and hostel or transport access [3, 10, 11]. Fourth, planning should recognize diversity within the ST population rather than assuming a single model suits all communities and regions [1, 9].

Educational justice for tribal communities must therefore combine redistribution with recognition. Better infrastructure, scholarships, and access are essential, but they are insufficient unless the school also becomes socially and culturally intelligible to the learner.

8. Conclusion

The educational condition of the Scheduled Tribe community in West Bengal reflects both progress and persistent inequality. Literacy has improved over time, school access has widened, and policy frameworks are more substantial than in earlier decades. Yet the evidence still shows large literacy gaps, severe gender disparity, and high dropout at the secondary stage. These patterns indicate that educational inequality is reproduced less through complete exclusion from schooling than through partial inclusion without sustained support.

The most urgent policy task is therefore to move beyond a narrow access model and toward a fuller understanding of educational participation. For the ST community in West Bengal, this means strengthening retention after the elementary stage, improving scholarship delivery, expanding residential and transport support, institutionalizing mother-tongue-sensitive teaching, and addressing the specific disadvantages faced by girls. Only then can education function not merely as a formal right, but as a lived avenue of dignity and social transformation [3, 5, 7, 13-15].

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