



## Barriers and Bridges to Learning: Educational Participation of Tribal Girls in Rural Purulia

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### Abstract:

*Educational participation among Scheduled Tribe (ST) girls in rural India continues to reflect persistent structural inequalities despite decades of policy intervention. This study examines the status, patterns, and determinants of educational participation among tribal girls in Purulia district of West Bengal using secondary data from the Census of India (2011), Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2023), District Information System for Education (DISE, 2021–2023), National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2019), and official policy documents of the Government of India. The analysis reveals substantial gender and community-based disparities in literacy, enrolment, learning outcomes, and retention. Economic insecurity, food scarcity, linguistic exclusion, infrastructural deficits, and entrenched gender norms emerge as critical barriers shaping educational trajectories. Simultaneously, initiatives such as Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), scholarships, hostels for tribal girls, Samagra Shiksha, and nutrition–education convergence under ICDS and PM POSHAN serve as important institutional bridges. However, the study argues that these initiatives have achieved uneven outcomes due to implementation gaps and limited contextual adaptation. The paper concludes that strengthening educational participation among tribal girls requires localized, gender-responsive, and culturally grounded interventions that integrate education with nutrition, livelihood security, and community engagement.*

**Keywords:** Tribal Girls, Structural inequalities, Educational Participation, Government Initiatives, Purulia District.

### Introduction:

Education occupies a central position in India's development discourse, recognized as a key instrument for social mobility, economic growth, and gender equality. Since Independence, the Indian state has undertaken multiple constitutional, legislative, and programmatic measures to expand educational access among historically marginalized communities. Despite these efforts, significant disparities persist across social groups, particularly among Scheduled Tribes (STs). These disparities are more pronounced for tribal girls, whose educational experiences are shaped by the intersection of gender, poverty, geography, and cultural marginalization.

Scheduled Tribes constitute approximately 8.6 percent of India's population, yet they remain among the most educationally disadvantaged groups (Census of India, 2011). National data consistently indicate lower literacy rates, higher dropout levels, and weaker learning outcomes among tribal populations compared to

national averages. Within this context, tribal girls face compounded disadvantage due to gendered labour expectations, early marriage, restricted mobility, and limited access to secondary and higher education.

Purulia district of West Bengal provides a critical empirical setting for examining these dynamics. Located in the western part of the state, Purulia is characterized by a high concentration of tribal population, predominantly residing in rural and forest-adjacent areas. The district is marked by low industrial development, agrarian distress, seasonal migration, and high levels of poverty. Although educational infrastructure has expanded under schemes such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Samagra Shiksha, educational participation among tribal girls weakens significantly beyond the elementary stage.

This paper seeks to analyze the structural barriers constraining educational participation among tribal girls in rural Purulia and to evaluate the role of government initiatives as potential bridges to learning. By synthesizing demographic, educational, and policy data, the study aims to contribute to debates on inclusive education and gender equity in tribal regions.

### **Review of Literature:**

Scholarly literature on tribal education in India highlights the persistence of educational disadvantage rooted in historical exclusion and structural inequality. Xaxa (2001) argues that tribal marginalization is not merely a function of poverty but is deeply embedded in political and institutional arrangements. Studies by Rao and Noronha (2018) emphasize that gender disparities within tribal communities remain underexplored, with tribal girls experiencing distinct patterns of exclusion compared to tribal boys.

Research on female education in rural India underscores the role of economic constraints, domestic labour, and social norms in shaping girls' educational outcomes (Nambissan, 2016). For tribal girls, these factors are intensified by geographic isolation and cultural dissonance between home and school environments. Mohanty (2003) and NCERT (2019) highlight the significance of language as a critical barrier, noting that instruction in unfamiliar languages often alienates tribal children and contributes to early disengagement.

Empirical studies using ASER data reveal that enrolment gains have not translated into learning outcomes, particularly in tribal-dominated regions (ASER Centre, 2023). Poor foundational skills increase the likelihood of repetition and dropout, especially among first-generation learners. Research by the Pratichi Institute (2022) further demonstrates how food insecurity and malnutrition adversely affect school attendance and cognitive performance.

Policy-focused studies acknowledge the potential of residential schools, scholarships, and hostels in improving retention among tribal girls but caution that implementation quality and local relevance remain uneven (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020). Overall, the literature points to the need for integrated, context-sensitive approaches that address both educational and socio-economic dimensions of exclusion.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

The study has the following objectives:

1. To analyze literacy levels and schooling patterns among tribal girls in Purulia district.
2. To examine learning outcomes and school infrastructure using ASER and DISE data.
3. To identify economic, social, and institutional barriers affecting educational participation.
4. To assess the role of government initiatives in improving access, retention, and learning.
5. To suggest policy measures for strengthening educational outcomes for tribal girls.

## **Data Sources and Methodology:**

The study is based on secondary data analysis. Data sources include:

- **Census of India (2011):** Demographic composition and literacy indicators
- **ASER Centre (2023):** Learning outcomes and foundational skills
- **DISE (2021–2023):** School infrastructure, teacher availability, and facilities
- **NSSO (2019):** Household social consumption on education
- **Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020):** Education-related schemes and interventions
- **NCERT (2005; 2019):** Curriculum framework and language policy
- **Pratichi Institute (2022) and Suchana Trust (2020):** Socio-economic and cultural context

The analysis adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, supported by tabular presentation of data. An intersectional framework is used to examine how gender and tribal identity interact to shape educational outcomes.

## **Socio-Economic Profile of Purulia District:**

Purulia district has a total population of approximately 2.93 million, of which Scheduled Tribes constitute around 18.4 percent (Census of India, 2011). The district is predominantly rural, with agriculture and daily wage labour forming the primary sources of livelihood. Low rainfall, poor soil quality, and limited irrigation contribute to agrarian instability and seasonal migration.

Tribal households in Purulia are characterized by low asset ownership, limited access to formal employment, and high dependence on public welfare schemes. These socio-economic conditions significantly influence educational decision-making, particularly for girls, whose labour is often critical to household survival.

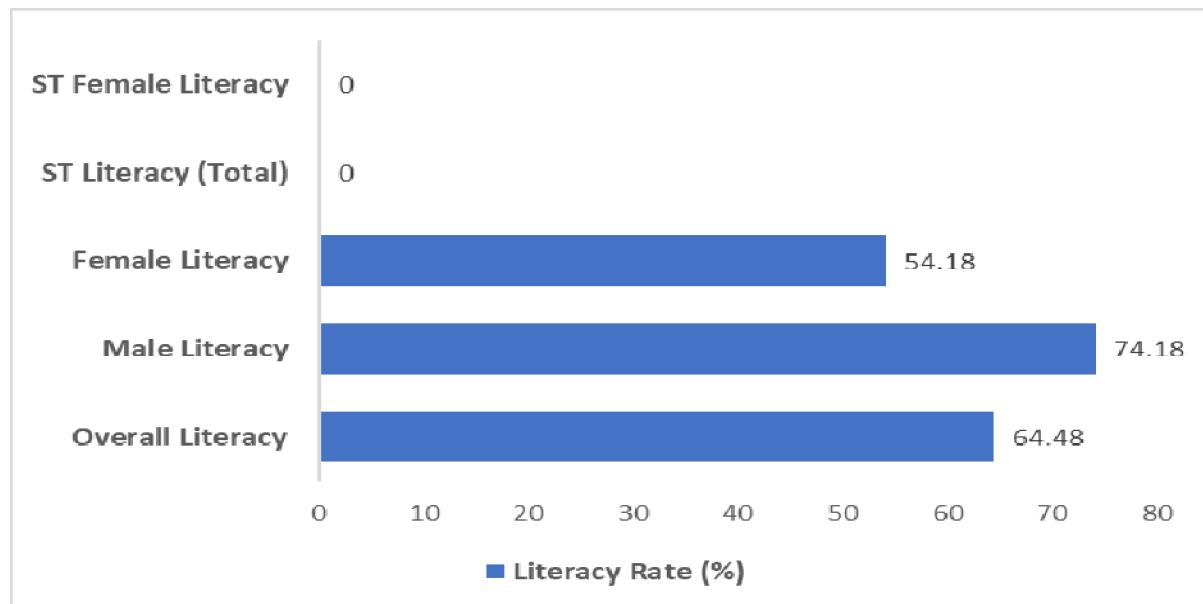
## **Literacy and School Enrolment:**

**Table 1: Literacy Rates in Purulia District (Census 2011)**

Category	Literacy Rate (%)
Overall Literacy	64.48
Male Literacy	74.18
Female Literacy	54.18
ST Literacy (Total)	~57–58
ST Female Literacy	~47

Source: Census of India, 2011

The data reveal a wide gender gap in literacy, which is further intensified among Scheduled Tribes. Tribal girls thus occupy the lowest position within the district's educational hierarchy.



**Table 2: Enrolment Pattern by Stage (Indicative Trends)**

Stage of Education	Participation Trend
Primary	High enrolment
Upper Primary	Moderate decline
Secondary	Sharp decline
Higher Secondary	Very low

Source: DISE (2021–2023)

Enrolment declines sharply at the secondary level, indicating that access alone does not ensure continuation.

#### **Learning Outcomes among Tribal Girls:**

- Foundational Skills and Schooling Outcomes (ASER 2023)**

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2023) provides critical insights into the quality of schooling in rural India, highlighting the gap between enrolment and actual learning. In West Bengal's rural and tribal-dominated districts, including Purulia, a significant proportion of students in upper primary grades lack foundational reading and numeracy skills. ASER data indicate that many children enrolled in Grades V–VIII are unable to read Grade II-level text or perform basic arithmetic operations such as subtraction and division.

These learning deficits are particularly pronounced among first-generation learners from tribal households, where parental literacy levels are low and academic support at home is limited. Poor learning outcomes reduce students' engagement with schooling and increase the probability of grade repetition and dropout. For tribal girls, whose education is often viewed as secondary to household responsibilities, weak learning achievement accelerates early withdrawal from school (ASER Centre, 2023).

**Table 3: Learning Outcomes in Rural West Bengal (Indicative, ASER 2023)**

Indicator (Age 10–14)	Proportion of Students (%)
Able to read Grade II text	< 50
Able to perform basic subtraction	~45
Able to perform basic division	< 35
Regular school attendance	Declining with age

Source: ASER Centre (2023)

These findings concluded that school participation without learning progression fails to ensure meaningful educational inclusion.

#### **School Infrastructure and Teacher Availability:**

- Infrastructure Constraints (DISE 2021–2023)**

Data from the District Information System for Education (DISE) reveal that although primary schools are widely distributed across rural Purulia, access to upper primary and secondary schools remains uneven. In many tribal-dominated blocks, students must travel long distances to attend secondary schools, posing safety and mobility challenges for adolescent girls.

DISE reports also highlight infrastructural deficiencies, including inadequate classrooms, lack of functional toilets for girls, and shortages of teaching staff. These factors disproportionately affect girls, particularly during adolescence.

**Table 4: School Infrastructure Constraints in Rural Purulia**

Indicator	Observed Status
Availability of Secondary Schools	Limited in remote blocks
Functional Girls' Toilets	Uneven
Female Teachers (Upper Primary & Secondary)	Inadequate
Pupil–Teacher Ratio	High
Hostel Facilities	Insufficient

Source: DISE Reports (2021–2023)

Infrastructure gaps are not gender-neutral. The absence of sanitation facilities and female teachers contributes directly to absenteeism and dropout among adolescent girls.

## **Barriers to Educational Participation:**

- **Economic Vulnerability and Household Constraints:** Economic insecurity remains a fundamental barrier to educational participation among tribal girls. According to the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2019), tribal households allocate significantly lower expenditure to education compared to non-tribal households due to unstable income sources and high dependence on daily wage labour. Seasonal migration for agricultural or construction work further disrupts schooling continuity. Girls are often required to manage household responsibilities in the absence of adult members, reducing attendance and study time.

The Pratichi Institute (2022) documents high levels of food insecurity among tribal households in West Bengal, including Purulia. Hunger and malnutrition adversely affect attendance, cognitive development, and learning capacity. Educational exclusion cannot be addressed without confronting livelihood insecurity and nutritional deprivation.

- **Language and Pedagogical Exclusion:** The language of instruction represents a critical yet under-addressed barrier. Most government schools in Purulia use Bengali or English as the medium of instruction, while many tribal children speak indigenous languages at home. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2019) demonstrates that mother-tongue-based education—such as the use of Ol Chiki for Santhal students—enhances comprehension, classroom participation, and retention. However, the scale of such interventions remains limited.
- **Gender Norms and Social Expectations:** Social norms play a decisive role in shaping educational trajectories. Baseline studies by Suchana Trust (2020) highlight the persistence of early marriage, domestic labour expectations, and lower educational aspirations for girls within tribal communities. Girls' education is often viewed as a temporary phase rather than a long-term investment, particularly beyond the elementary stage. These norms, combined with economic pressures, reinforce early dropout.

## **Government Initiatives as Bridges to Learning:**

Despite structural barriers, multiple government initiatives have sought to improve educational access and retention among tribal girls.

### **1. Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)**

Eklavya Model Residential Schools, implemented by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, aim to provide quality residential education to tribal students from remote areas. EMRS address barriers of distance, safety, and household poverty and have demonstrated improved retention, particularly among girls (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020).

### **2. Scholarships and Hostels for Tribal Girls**

Pre-matric and post-matric scholarships reduce the direct cost of schooling, while hostels for tribal girls provide a secure learning environment at the secondary and higher secondary levels. These interventions are particularly significant in districts like Purulia, where secondary schools are sparsely distributed.

**Table 5: Major Government Initiatives Supporting Tribal Girls' Education**

Initiative	Objective
EMRS	Residential quality education
Pre- & Post-Matric Scholarships	Reduce financial burden
Hostels for Tribal Girls	Address safety and distance
Samagra Shiksha	Access, retention, learning
ICDS & PM POSHAN	Nutrition support

Source: Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2020); Ministry of Education

### **3. Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan**

Samagra Shiksha integrates earlier schemes to address access, equity, and quality. Provisions such as free textbooks, uniforms, bicycles, remedial teaching, and teacher training are designed to support disadvantaged students. However, DISE data suggest uneven implementation across blocks.

### **4. Nutrition–Education Convergence**

Schemes such as Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and PM POSHAN play a crucial role in supporting educational participation by addressing hunger and malnutrition. Studies indicate that nutritional support improves attendance and classroom engagement, especially among food-insecure households (Pratichi Institute, 2022).

#### **Discussion:**

The findings of this study underscore that educational participation among tribal girls in rural Purulia is shaped by a complex interaction of structural, economic, institutional, and cultural factors. While policy initiatives have expanded access to schooling, particularly at the primary level, disparities in literacy, learning outcomes, and retention persist, especially at the secondary stage.

Census 2011 data reveal a substantial gender gap in literacy within the district, which is further intensified among Scheduled Tribes. ASER (2023) findings demonstrate that enrolment gains have not translated into foundational learning, particularly for first-generation learners in tribal-dominated areas. These learning deficits contribute directly to grade repetition and dropout, reinforcing educational exclusion.

DISE data highlight infrastructural and institutional shortcomings, including shortages of female teachers, uneven sanitation facilities, and limited access to secondary schools in remote areas. These constraints disproportionately affect adolescent girls, for whom safety, mobility, and dignity are central to continued schooling.

Economic vulnerability and food insecurity emerge as critical underlying barriers. NSSO (2019) and Pratichi Institute (2022) data illustrate how livelihood insecurity reduces household investment in education and compels girls to assume domestic and income-generating responsibilities. Educational policy, when disconnected from nutrition and livelihood interventions, thus remains insufficient.

Language and pedagogy constitute another dimension of structural exclusion. Evidence from NCERT (2019) clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of mother-tongue-based instruction in improving learning outcomes

among tribal children. However, limited implementation reflects institutional preference for standardized curricula over culturally responsive pedagogy.

Government initiatives such as EMRS, scholarships, hostels, Samagra Shiksha, and nutrition programs represent important bridges to learning. Nevertheless, their impact remains uneven due to implementation gaps, weak monitoring, and limited community participation. Without localized, gender-responsive adaptation, these initiatives risk functioning as compensatory measures rather than transformative interventions.

### **Policy Implications:**

Based on the analysis, the following policy implications emerge:

1. **Shift from Access to Learning:** Educational interventions must prioritize learning outcomes and retention, not merely enrolment.
2. **Strengthen Secondary Education Access:** Expansion of hostels, transport facilities, and residential schools is essential in tribal-dominated blocks.
3. **Integrate Nutrition and Education:** Stronger convergence between PM POSHAN, ICDS, and schooling is necessary to address hunger-related absenteeism.
4. **Promote Mother-Tongue Pedagogy:** Scaled implementation of culturally responsive instruction can improve comprehension and retention.
5. **Enhance Female Teacher Recruitment:** Increasing the presence of female teachers can significantly improve girls' participation.
6. **Community Engagement:** Involving parents, self-help groups, and local institutions can help challenge gender norms and improve retention.

### **Limitations of the Study:**

This study is based entirely on secondary data and does not include primary fieldwork in Purulia district. While national and district-level datasets provide valuable insights, they may not capture micro-level variations across villages or communities. Additionally, ASER and DISE data are indicative rather than disaggregated specifically for tribal girls in Purulia. Future studies incorporating longitudinal and qualitative methods would provide deeper understanding of lived educational experiences.

### **Scope for Future Research:**

Future research may focus on:

- Longitudinal tracking of tribal girls' educational trajectories
- Comparative studies across tribal districts in West Bengal
- Ethnographic research on classroom experiences and language use
- Evaluation studies of EMRS and hostel programs
- Gender-differentiated analysis of learning outcomes

Such research would strengthen evidence-based policymaking and localized intervention design.

### **Conclusion:**

Educational participation among tribal girls in rural Purulia remains constrained by interconnected structural, economic, and socio-cultural factors. Census 2011 and ASER 2023 data highlight persistent disparities in literacy and learning outcomes, while DISE reports reveal infrastructural and institutional gaps. Government

initiatives such as EMRS, scholarships, Samagra Shiksha, and nutrition programs have expanded access and provided important support mechanisms. However, their transformative potential depends on localized, gender-responsive, and culturally grounded implementation.

Strengthening educational participation requires moving beyond uniform policy frameworks toward integrated strategies that link education with nutrition, livelihood security, and social empowerment. Ensuring that tribal girls are not only enrolled in school but are able to learn, complete their education, and exercise agency is essential for achieving inclusive and equitable development.

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**Citation:** Basu, M., (2026) “Barriers and Bridges to Learning: Educational Participation of Tribal Girls in Rural Purulia”, *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-4, Issue-01, January-2026.