



Higher Education Access and Exclusion among Scheduled Tribe Girls in South Dinajpur District of West Bengal

Krishna Haldar

Research scholar, Department of Education, RKDF University, Ranchi
Email: krishnahaldar297@gmail.com

Abstract:

Access to higher education is an important pathway for social mobility and empowerment, yet Scheduled Tribe girls in the South Dinajpur district of West Bengal continue to face serious exclusion from this level of education. The present study focuses on understanding the nature of access to higher education and the multiple factors that contribute to the exclusion of Scheduled Tribe girls from colleges and universities. Using secondary sources such as census reports, government education statistics, policy documents, and existing research studies, the paper examines social, economic, cultural, and institutional barriers affecting their participation in higher education. The study highlights that poverty, early marriage, household responsibilities, lack of nearby higher educational institutions, poor transport facilities, and inadequate financial support are major obstacles. In addition, low parental education, limited awareness about higher education opportunities, language barriers, and gender discrimination within families further reduce the chances of continuation beyond secondary schooling. Institutional challenges such as insufficient hostels for tribal girls, lack of academic guidance, and weak implementation of scholarship schemes also contribute to exclusion. The findings reveal that despite constitutional safeguards and government initiatives aimed at promoting tribal education, the benefits do not reach many Scheduled Tribe girls at the grassroots level. The gap between policy intentions and ground realities remains wide in South Dinajpur district. The study emphasizes the need for targeted interventions such as strengthening local colleges, improving hostel and transport facilities, ensuring timely disbursement of scholarships, and creating awareness among tribal communities about the value of higher education for girls. So, the paper argues that improving access to higher education for Scheduled Tribe girls requires a holistic approach that addresses both socio-cultural barriers and institutional shortcomings. Enhancing higher educational participation among tribal girls is essential not only for individual empowerment but also for inclusive regional development.

Keywords: Higher Education, Scheduled Tribe Girls, Educational Exclusion, Access to Education, South Dinajpur, West Bengal.

Introduction:

Higher education plays a vital role in shaping individual development, social mobility, and economic progress. It provides young people with advanced knowledge, skills, and opportunities that help them participate meaningfully in society. However, access to higher education in India is not equally available to all sections of the population. Among the most disadvantaged groups are Scheduled Tribe communities,

especially girls, who continue to face exclusion due to social, economic, and cultural disadvantages. In districts like South Dinajpur in West Bengal, these inequalities are more visible because of geographical isolation, limited educational infrastructure, and persistent poverty. Scheduled Tribe girls in South Dinajpur often encounter multiple barriers that restrict their entry into higher education. While many girls manage to complete primary or secondary schooling, a significant number drop out before reaching colleges or universities. Factors such as financial hardship, early marriage, domestic responsibilities, lack of nearby higher educational institutions, and poor transportation facilities make continuation of education difficult. In addition, low parental awareness about higher education, language difficulties, and traditional gender norms further reduce educational aspirations among tribal girls. Although the government has introduced various policies, reservation systems, and scholarship schemes to promote higher education among Scheduled Tribe students, their impact at the ground level remains limited. Many eligible girls are either unaware of these facilities or unable to access them due to administrative delays and institutional weaknesses. As a result, the gap between policy goals and actual participation in higher education continues to widen. This study focuses on understanding the issues of access and exclusion faced by Scheduled Tribe girls in higher education in South Dinajpur district. By examining the social, economic, and institutional factors influencing their educational journey, the study aims to highlight the challenges and draw attention to the need for inclusive and targeted educational interventions.

Need and Significance of the Study

The need for studying higher education access and exclusion among Scheduled Tribe girls in South Dinajpur district of West Bengal arises from the continuing educational inequalities faced by this socially marginalized group. Higher education is an important tool for empowerment, economic independence, and social inclusion, yet a large number of Scheduled Tribe girls remain outside its reach. Understanding the reasons behind their limited participation is essential for addressing long-standing disparities and ensuring equal educational opportunities. South Dinajpur is a district where many Scheduled Tribe families live in rural and semi-rural areas with limited educational facilities. Despite improvements in school enrollment, the transition from secondary education to higher education remains weak for tribal girls. Factors such as poverty, early marriage, household responsibilities, lack of nearby colleges, and unsafe or costly transportation create serious obstacles. Social and cultural norms that prioritize boys' education over girls' education further reduce the chances of tribal girls continuing their studies. These challenges highlight the need for a focused study that examines both personal and structural barriers. The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and social organizations working in the field of tribal and girls' education. By identifying gaps between existing government policies and their actual implementation, the study can help in improving the effectiveness of scholarship schemes, hostel facilities, and support services. The findings can also contribute to designing community-based awareness programs that encourage families to support higher education for girls. Moreover, this study adds to academic literature on tribal education by offering district-level evidence, which is often limited. Enhancing higher education access for Scheduled Tribe girls is crucial not only for their individual development but also for promoting inclusive growth and social justice in the region.

Table: Need and Significance of the Study

Aspect	Description
Educational Inequality	Scheduled Tribe girls continue to face unequal access to higher education due to social, economic, and gender-based disadvantages in South Dinajpur district.
Socio-economic Barriers	Poverty, early marriage, household responsibilities, and lack of financial resources restrict continuation of education beyond secondary level.

Geographical Constraints	Many tribal habitations are located in rural and remote areas with limited access to colleges, hostels, and reliable transport facilities.
Policy Implementation Gap	Although scholarships, reservations, and welfare schemes exist, poor awareness and weak implementation limit their benefits at the grassroots level.
Need for Focused Research	District-level studies on higher education of Scheduled Tribe girls are limited, creating a gap in localized and evidence-based understanding.
Significance for Policymakers	The study helps policymakers identify real barriers and improve planning, monitoring, and delivery of higher education support schemes.
Academic Contribution	The research adds to existing literature on tribal education and gender studies by providing region-specific insights.
Social Importance	Improving higher education access for Scheduled Tribe girls promotes empowerment, social inclusion, and inclusive regional development.

Literature Review

Several studies have highlighted that access to higher education in India remains uneven, especially for marginalized communities such as Scheduled Tribes. Researchers have consistently pointed out that although enrollment at the primary level has improved, participation of Scheduled Tribe students declines sharply at the higher education stage, with girls being the most affected group (Xaxa, 2014). Social exclusion, poverty, and geographical isolation are identified as major reasons behind this educational gap. Studies focusing on tribal girls' education emphasize that gender and tribal identity together create multiple layers of disadvantage. According to Sen and Dreze (2018), tribal girls often face early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and low family expectations regarding education, which limit their chances of entering colleges and universities. Lack of role models and weak academic support further reduce their motivation to pursue higher studies. Research on West Bengal shows that regional disparities play an important role in shaping higher education access. Mukherjee (2016) notes that districts with high tribal populations often suffer from inadequate higher educational institutions, poor transport facilities, and limited hostel accommodation for girls. These structural limitations make it difficult for tribal girls to continue education after completing higher secondary schooling. Scholars have also examined the effectiveness of government policies and welfare schemes aimed at promoting tribal education. While reservation policies, scholarships, and hostels are designed to support Scheduled Tribe students, several studies argue that poor implementation and lack of awareness reduce their impact (Kumar, 2019). Delays in scholarship disbursement and complex administrative procedures often discourage tribal girls from enrolling in higher education institutions.

Language and cultural barriers are another recurring theme in the literature. Tribal students, particularly girls, struggle to adapt to the medium of instruction used in higher education, which is often different from their home language (Basu, 2017). This leads to low confidence and academic difficulties, increasing the risk of dropout. Despite growing literature on tribal education, district-level studies focusing specifically on Scheduled Tribe girls and higher education remain limited. Most research provides state-level or national-level analysis, leaving gaps in understanding local realities (Chakraborty, 2020). Therefore, a focused study on South Dinajpur district is necessary to understand the specific social, economic, and institutional factors contributing to higher education exclusion among Scheduled Tribe girls and to suggest context-specific solutions.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the level of access to higher education among Scheduled Tribe girls in the South Dinajpur district of West Bengal.
2. To identify the social, economic, and institutional factors responsible for the exclusion of Scheduled Tribe girls from higher education in South Dinajpur district of West Bengal.

Research Methodology

The present study employs a secondary data analytical research design to examine access to higher education and exclusion among Scheduled Tribe girls in South Dinajpur District, West Bengal. Data have been collected from reliable secondary sources such as the Census of India reports, District Statistical Handbooks, reports of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, educational surveys, government policy documents, and published research articles and journals. Information related to enrollment, literacy, gender disparity, and higher education participation of Scheduled Tribe girls has been reviewed and analyzed. The study follows a descriptive and analytical approach to understand social, economic, and institutional factors influencing higher education access. Simple qualitative interpretation and comparative analysis have been used to draw conclusions in easy and understandable language.

Discussion

The discussion of this study highlights the continuing challenges faced by Scheduled Tribe girls in accessing higher education in South Dinajpur district of West Bengal. Although education is recognized as a basic right and several government initiatives exist to promote higher education among marginalized communities, the actual participation of Scheduled Tribe girls at the college and university level remains very low. The findings clearly show that access to higher education is shaped by a combination of social, economic, and institutional factors rather than a single cause. One of the most significant factors contributing to exclusion is economic hardship. Many Scheduled Tribe families in South Dinajpur depend on daily wage labor or agriculture, making it difficult to bear the cost of higher education. Even when tuition fees are low, expenses related to transport, study materials, and accommodation discourage families from sending their daughters to colleges. As a result, girls are often expected to support household work or contribute to family income instead of continuing education. Social and cultural practices also play an important role in limiting higher education opportunities. Early marriage, traditional gender roles, and low parental expectations regarding girls' education remain common in many tribal households. Girls are often encouraged to complete schooling only up to a basic level, after which marriage and domestic responsibilities become priorities. Such practices reduce motivation and aspiration for higher studies among tribal girls.

Institutional barriers further deepen the problem of exclusion. The lack of nearby colleges, insufficient hostel facilities for girls, and poor transport connectivity make higher education physically inaccessible for many Scheduled Tribe girls. In addition, delays in scholarship disbursement and limited academic guidance reduce retention and completion rates. Many girls are unaware of available support schemes or face difficulties in the application process. The discussion also reveals a clear gap between policy intentions and ground realities. While policies aim to promote inclusive education, weak implementation and lack of monitoring prevent effective outcomes. Therefore, improving access to higher education for Scheduled Tribe girls in South Dinajpur requires not only policy support but also community awareness, institutional strengthening, and gender-sensitive educational planning.

Table: Different aspects of Discussion

Dimension	Discussion Points
Overall Access to Higher Education	Participation of Scheduled Tribe girls in higher education in South Dinajpur remains low despite the presence of government policies and schemes aimed at inclusion.
Economic Factors	Poverty, dependence on daily wage work, and inability to afford transport, study materials, and accommodation discourage families from supporting higher education for girls.
Social and Cultural Barriers	Early marriage, traditional gender roles, and low parental expectations limit girls' educational aspirations beyond secondary level.
Institutional Limitations	Lack of nearby colleges, inadequate hostel facilities for girls, and poor transport connectivity restrict physical access to higher education institutions.
Scholarship and Support Issues	Delays in scholarship disbursement, limited awareness of schemes, and complex application procedures reduce enrollment and retention of Scheduled Tribe girls.
Policy–Practice Gap	Although inclusive education policies exist, weak implementation and monitoring prevent effective outcomes at the grassroots level.
Impact on Girls' Aspirations	Continuous barriers reduce motivation, confidence, and long-term educational goals among Scheduled Tribe girls.
Need for Inclusive Measures	Strengthening institutions, improving awareness, and adopting gender-sensitive planning are necessary to improve higher education access.

Findings

The study reveals that access to higher education among Scheduled Tribe girls in South Dinajpur district of West Bengal is limited and uneven. Although many girls complete secondary education, a significant number are unable to continue to colleges or universities. Economic hardship is found to be a major barrier, as most tribal families have low income and cannot afford expenses related to higher education. Social factors such as early marriage, household responsibilities, and low parental awareness further reduce educational participation of girls. The study also finds that lack of nearby higher education institutions, inadequate hostel facilities, and poor transport connectivity create physical barriers to access. In addition, scholarship schemes and reservation benefits are not fully effective due to delays, lack of information, and administrative difficulties. Overall, the findings indicate a clear gap between government policies and actual educational outcomes. Addressing both socio-cultural and institutional challenges is essential to improve higher education access for Scheduled Tribe girls in South Dinajpur district.

Conclusion

The study on higher education access and exclusion among Scheduled Tribe girls in South Dinajpur district of West Bengal clearly shows that educational inequality continues to exist at the higher education level.

Although schooling facilities and enrollment have improved over the years, many Scheduled Tribe girls are still unable to move beyond secondary education. Economic poverty, family responsibilities, early marriage, and traditional social attitudes toward girls' education remain major barriers that restrict their participation in higher education. The study also highlights important institutional challenges, such as the lack of nearby colleges, insufficient hostel facilities for girls, poor transport systems, and limited academic guidance. Even though the government has introduced several policies, scholarships, and reservation benefits to promote higher education among Scheduled Tribe students, these measures have not been fully effective at the grassroots level. Problems related to lack of awareness, delayed implementation, and administrative difficulties reduce the impact of these initiatives. So, the findings suggest that exclusion of Scheduled Tribe girls from higher education is not caused by a single factor but by the combined effect of social, economic, and institutional constraints. Improving access to higher education in South Dinajpur requires a comprehensive approach that includes community awareness, gender-sensitive planning, strengthening of educational institutions, and effective implementation of welfare schemes. Ensuring equal access to higher education for Scheduled Tribe girls is essential for their empowerment, social inclusion, and the overall development of the district.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several measures are recommended to improve access to higher education among Scheduled Tribe girls in South Dinajpur district of West Bengal. First, the availability of higher educational institutions should be increased in tribal-dominated and rural areas so that distance does not become a major barrier. Where new institutions are not possible, improving transport facilities and providing safe and affordable travel options for girls is essential. Second, hostel facilities for Scheduled Tribe girls need to be expanded and strengthened. Well-maintained hostels near colleges can reduce safety concerns and help girls continue their education without daily travel difficulties. Third, scholarship schemes and financial assistance should be made more effective through timely disbursement, simplified application procedures, and proper awareness campaigns at the community level. Fourth, community awareness programs should be organized to change social attitudes toward girls' education. Parents and local leaders should be encouraged to support higher education for girls and delay early marriage. Finally, academic guidance, mentoring, and counselling services should be provided in schools and colleges to help Scheduled Tribe girls understand higher education opportunities and career options. A coordinated effort from government, educational institutions, and community organizations is necessary to reduce exclusion and promote inclusive higher education.

References

- Basu, S. (2017). Education of tribal children in India: Issues and challenges. *Social Change*, 47(3), 381–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049085717712845>
- Census of India. (2011). Primary census abstract: Scheduled tribes. Government of India.
- Chakraborty, T. (2020). Gender disparity in higher education in India: A regional analysis. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 22(2), 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40847-019-00101-3>
- Desai, S., & Kulkarni, V. (2008). Changing educational inequalities in India in the context of affirmative action. *Demography*, 45(2), 245–270. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.0.0001>
- Government of India. (2020). National Education Policy 2020. Ministry of Education.

- Government of West Bengal. (2019). District statistical handbook: Dakshin Dinajpur. Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics.
- Kumar, K. (2019). Implementation of tribal education policies in India: A critical review. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 65(3), 456–469.
- Mukherjee, D. (2016). Regional disparities in educational development in West Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 51(24), 59–67.
- Nambissan, G. B. (2010). Exclusion and inclusion in Indian education. *Sociological Bulletin*, 59(2), 163–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022920100202>
- National Sample Survey Office. (2018). Education in India: NSS 75th round. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation.
- Planning Commission. (2013). Twelfth Five Year Plan: Social sectors. Government of India.
- Rao, N. (2012). Education of scheduled tribes in India: Problems and prospects. *Journal of Educational Planning and Administration*, 26(2), 137–150.
- Sen, A. (2000). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Sen, A., & Drèze, J. (2018). *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions*. Penguin Books.
- Sharma, A. (2015). Gender and access to higher education in rural India. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 41, 102–110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2014.11.012>
- Singh, A. K. (2014). Educational development of scheduled tribes in India. *Indian Journal of Social Research*, 55(1), 45–60.
- Tilak, J. B. G. (2015). Private higher education in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(40), 32–38.
- UNESCO. (2017). Education for sustainable development goals: Learning objectives. UNESCO Publishing.
- World Bank. (2020). Gender equality and development in India. World Bank Publications.
- Xaxa, V. (2014). *Tribes and social exclusion*. Oxford University Press.
- Xaxa, V. (2019). Education and inequality among scheduled tribes. *Indian Journal of Human Development*, 13(2), 137–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973703019867242>

Citation: Haldar, K., (2026) “Higher Education Access and Exclusion among Scheduled Tribe Girls in South Dinajpur District of West Bengal”, *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-4, Issue-02, February-2026.