



Barriers and Beliefs: A Study on the Attitude of Scheduled Caste Parents towards Female Education in the Context of Socio-Economic Marginalization in Uttar Dinajpur

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Abstract: *For a girl child to attend and remain in school depends on a whole bunch of decisions that are not hers to make when she is born in Uttar Dinajpur's Scheduled Caste community. It's determined by her family's finances, by the values of her community, and by her parents' experience: Years of practice have made them cautious about systems that are not necessarily benevolent. This study attempts to come to terms with that reality more honestly and intimately. The District of Uttar Dinajpur in the north corner of West Bengal is a district where large numbers of its SC population, as much as one in four, live in socio-economic marginality, which is not just a statistical fact but a problem in their day-to-day existence. Poor socio-economic conditions, low levels of parental education, reliance on irregular wage employment and strong social norms regarding gender roles persist in influencing the socio-emotional factors that affect family attitudes and feelings regarding the education of daughters in this region. The barriers are not always visible on the exterior, but they are very visible on the interior. In the present study, the author has used secondary sources of information such as published research, government reports, academic literature, etc., which covers the attitude of Scheduled Caste parents towards Girl education in the specific socio-economic scenario. Instead of just examining what is happening in numbers, it attempts to get to know the attitudes, anxieties and real-life limitations that underlie the numbers—and play an important but obscure role in parental behaviour choices. From this review comes a multi-layered picture of how economic disadvantage and cultural worldviews do not necessarily work in isolation, but how they work together to make it more difficult for girls to obtain and finish their schooling. The study puts forth the view that with non-ignoring both the dimensions and without taking actions accordingly, the improvement of female education among the Scheduled Castes community in this district would not be a full and effective process.*

Keywords: *Scheduled Caste Parents, Female Education, Parental Attitude, Socio-Economic Marginalization, Barriers to Education, Cultural Beliefs*

Introduction: All children must have the opportunity to learn. Most would agree that this is something they would never have said. In actual practice, however, for thousands of girls born to SC parents in districts such as Uttar Dinajpur (West Bengal), this opportunity is suppressed, deferred, or denied as they come to adulthood. There isn't any easy explanation for this, and it isn't something that a single individual or extended family is to blame for. Avoiding these is based on something far older and far deeper. Uttar Dinajpur is a district with a burden of multiple disadvantages. It is far away from the big cities, economically backward and has a significant scheduled caste population which has been marginalized from the social and institutional mainstream. Earning a living takes up a lot of their mental energy, particularly in this district where families—particularly those from the Scheduled Caste community—are preoccupied with how they're

going to survive. These beliefs are not born of indifference surrounding girls' education. Born from experience. Their hesitation starts to make sense when they see others struggle even with sending their daughters to school, when they see girls suffer harassment on the way to the nearest secondary school, or when they hear from community elders about their duties for marriage and family honour, they are repeatedly reminded of them. It's not fair, but it is understandable. This study enters into that space of understanding. It tries to examine the barriers and the deeply held beliefs that underpin Scheduled Caste parents' attitude towards girls' education in Uttar Dinajpur based on existing literature and documented evidence, hoping that a deeper understanding will result in more real and lasting change.

Need and Significance of the Study: Education spread across the population has improved significantly in last few decades in India, but education has not been equally distributed. The gap between the performance of a girl child at the national level and her performance in the districts of educationally backward classes, like Uttar Dinajpur, is wide in the case of Scheduled Caste girls. This is the space that makes the need for this study so apparent. This study is needed because we simply don't know enough about what is going on in the minds of Scheduled Caste households as they consider a daughter education. We do have enrollment numbers. We know the usual reasons for dropouts. Often, however, what we are not aware of are the thoughts that quietly accompany the numbers, the beliefs that lie behind parents' behaviour, and the obstacles that continue to propel girls out the doors of our schools, year after year. IMMUNE is a tool that requires knowledge of the dynamics within an organization, as without that awareness, any solution we provide will be only partially fulfilled. Uttar Dinajpur is a unique region. It's a rural district, but it's not just another rural district. It is an area of low educational attainment for secondary education and where poverty is replete with robust community beliefs and values, and where lives of Scheduled Caste families, despite the context of social and economic hardship that many policy documents overlook, are far from simple. There are several reasons why one should study this district in particular: firstly, because it matters so few things can be inferred from other district areas. This study is also relevant to those working on the ground, since it highlights the importance of design. Studies addressing this region must be relevant to the context that community workers, local administrators, social welfare and educational institutions are facing each day in their work. Authentic research that is respectful of local beliefs and barriers is more helpful to them than research which only confirms what national data predicts. Most of all, this study is of importance because the girls it speaks about matter. These barriers represent thousands of lost young women each year in this district.

Table 1: Need and Significance of the Study

Aspect	Details
The Core Problem	Despite national progress in education, Scheduled Caste girls in Uttar Dinajpur continue to face a wide and painful gap between national achievement and local ground reality, making this study both necessary and timely.
What We Know but Do Not Fully Understand	Enrollment figures and dropout statistics are available but they do not explain the thinking behind those numbers, the beliefs guiding parents, and the barriers silently pushing girls away from classrooms year after year.
Limitation of Existing Solutions	Without understanding the inner workings of parental decision making within Scheduled Caste households, any educational intervention or policy solution offered will remain incomplete and partially effective at best.
Why Uttar Dinajpur	Uttar Dinajpur is not just another rural district. It carries a unique combination of deep poverty, strong community belief systems, limited access to quality secondary

Specifically	education, and socio-economic pressures that generalized findings from other regions cannot fully capture or address.
Gap in Policy Documentation	Scheduled Caste families in this district navigate daily life under conditions that most policy documents fail to fully represent, making a focused and context-specific study essential for honest understanding.
Relevance to Ground Level Stakeholders	Teachers, community workers, local administrators, and social welfare organizations working in this region need research that speaks directly to their local context rather than research that only confirms what national-level data already suggests.
Significance of Local Belief Systems	Understanding community beliefs around gender roles, marriage, and the perceived value of female education is just as important as understanding economic barriers, because beliefs and finances together shape every parental decision in this district.
Human Significance	Beyond academic and policy value, this study matters most because the girls it speaks about matter. Every year lost without addressing these barriers represents another year of stolen potential for thousands of young women in Uttar Dinajpur.

Review of Literature: There has been a considerable amount of literature on the dynamics of social marginalization and female education from different scholars and researchers across India, which has insightful findings that are relevant to the situation in Uttar Dinajpur. If one carefully reads through this literature, one will find that the impediments to access and continuation of education faced by Scheduled Caste girls are not new, not chance or accidental and definitely not limited to one district or one state. Nambissan (2010) has written extensively on the lives of Dalit children in Indian schools, where there has been an observation that remains with him even after. Exclusion is not always out of school gates, she found. It also occurs in classrooms, in how teachers communicate with some of the kids, in the classroom space, and in the silences about caste identity. This is an invisible, but significant cause for parents to become hesitant to send their scheduled caste girls to school every day: the burden of discrimination faced by them in the premises of the schools.

Studies conducted by Ramachandran (2004) on gender and social equity in primary education in the five Indian States showed that cultural factors relating to femininity, mobility and family honour have significant impact on parental decisions regarding daughters' education. Her research pointed to a correlation between the distance between home and school and the social riskiness associated with girls' movement in the space in communities, where, for some, this distance is a logistical issue, while for others, it is more than that. It becomes a stopping point. Tilak (2002) brought to light the nature of household poverty as a structural problem and not a failure. His analysis revealed that, for poor families, the trade-offs they made in their education choices were always against the long-term goal of investing in education, and it was always the daughters who took a hit when it became necessary. In such districts as Uttar Dinajpur, in which a day labour force is the core of the majority of economies of the Scheduled Caste households, this pattern is quite prominent. Majumdar and Mooij (2011) conducted classroom-based research into the nature of educational inequalities in India and discovered that the disadvantages faced by learners from marginalized communities is a disadvantage not just in terms of poverty. In the absence of education that means anything to them, there is nothing to conceive of in their minds to see how education would sustain their daughter. This lack of education in the family raises a tacit disbelief that any government initiative can tackle head-on.

In this context, Sarkar (2013) specifically addressed the dropout trends of girls who belonged to the Scheduled Caste community in rural West Bengal and determined that early marriage was the most

disruptive factor in a girl's schooling in the rural area of West Bengal. His discoveries revealed that by age thirteen or fourteen, the discussion of a girl's education in most of the Scheduled Caste homes shifts away and moves into the domain of talk about marriage, and this transition is as much the result of community pressures and social fears as it is of economic appreciation. So, this literature suggests that the resistance of scheduled caste parents to their daughters' education lies not only in their ignorance. They are the product of actual dangers, anxiety and pressures that have developed over many generations and are still present in all of the subtle family choices that happen in the quiet moments of everyday life.

Objectives

1. To examine the attitudes of Scheduled Caste parents towards girls' education in relation to their socio-economic and cultural conditions in Uttar Dinajpur District.
2. To identify the major social and economic barriers affecting parental support for girls' continued education in Scheduled Caste communities.

Research Methodology: The qualitative research approach and secondary data/secondary analysis are the methods of this study, and all data and analysis are based on secondary data. The research, on the contrary, is based on critical systematic examination of a wide range of existing sources, such as published academic journal articles, government census records, district-level reports, scheme evaluation reports, and books and working papers dealing with the theme of caste, gender, socio-economic marginalisation or female education in West Bengal and India, more broadly. The method that is used here the most is interpretive document analysis, which involves close reading, thoughtful comparison, and interpretive analysis of selected secondary sources as they relate to the specific research questions for this study. The sources have been selected according to their direct relevance to Scheduled caste communities and their attitudes towards the children, differences in female schooling, and the socio-economic condition in Uttar Dinajpur district, so that the analysis is always grounded, focused and contextually true throughout.

Discussion: A crucial point which emerges from a brief consideration of the relevant secondary literature on this topic is that beliefs, as such, do not naturally emerge. They know this because of their experience, observation and their specific situation day-by-day in the family. It is not just a matter of old age thinking that a girl's education is of no use at all or does not hold the same importance as boys. Believing a girl's education is a waste of time or not as important as learning for boys is not just an outdated concept for parents of Scheduled Caste community. It's a faith that has been carefully fostered and strengthened over many years of economic hardship, social marginalization and little tangible proof that education makes any difference to the lives of girls in this area. All literature consulted in this study theorises that socio-economic and cultural factors do not exist in isolation to inculcate parental attitudes. They work together. A financially unstable family is also more likely to reside within a tightly knit community that upholds traditional gender roles and is unchallenged by them. It seems economically risky and socially unnecessary in this context to invest heavily in a daughter's education. Some mothers who never got to school do not fully envision what education can do for their daughters, not because they don't love them or feel they need to be better off, but because they never experienced it first-hand. In Uttar Dinajpur, particularly, the belief is reinforced by real-life challenges, as the marginalized communities of the Scheduled Caste are subjected to multiple disadvantages, such as low income, lack of regular employment, and regional disparities in access to better educational opportunities. If that parent has noticed that a secondary school is many kilometres away, has no safe means of transport, and the school is not always a welcoming place for children from the community, they may start to see that it is not so much a prejudice as a conclusion from everyday life.

The second aim of this study was to investigate whether there were recurring trends in the literature examined, like the barriers that kept recurring as explanations for why Scheduled Caste parents in this area are reluctant to invest in their daughter's education. The issues that came out of that evaluation were not a

single problem, but rather a tightly interwoven series of challenges that interlock in such a way that overcoming one individually is not very easy. The theme of economic pressure was most common and strongest throughout sources. The indirect costs of education – such as transportation, books, clothes, and the contribution of a girl’s domestic work at home – accumulate unobtrusively and can be quite burdensome for poor families. Safety was also in the spotlight, with several reports of parental apprehension regarding girls’ journeys to school – a fear fuelled by the real dangers and social issues facing them, not their imagination. Early marriage was perhaps one in particular that proved to be a very cultural obstacle. In this district, two community factors in pushing a girl towards marriage at the early stages of adolescence - the expectation to marry and the fact that no single family would be able to withstand all pressure to marry - are in play. These two community factors, expectation to marry and that no single family could face all the push to marry, when coupled with the young girl being from a Scheduled Caste family, will make it very difficult for her family to stay on in school. In addition to this, the non-belief among parents in the significance of education in bringing economic and social change to the girls of the Scheduled Caste still continued to be a demoralizing factor in the motivational status of the parents in nearly every source analysed.

Findings: The study of secondary literature shows that the attitudes of the parents, particularly the Scheduled Caste parents, in Uttar Dinajpur towards female education are not just because of indifferent or ignorance. They have been influenced by socio-economic factors, which have little scope for the development of long-term thinking in education. It was consistently found that, under the economic stress experienced by the children’s families, there was low endorsement of the importance of girls’ education beyond the primary school level, with social gender norms still deeply entrenched in the community. In families under economic pressure, where parents’ literacy rates are low and social gender norms are strong, low levels of endorsement of the importance of girls’ education beyond the primary school were consistently demonstrated. An obvious trend was more positive attitudes among the parents, in which mothers had some experience of education and the family’s income was relatively stable, with regard to girls’ further studies. Five major barriers related to each other were seen as the main factor leading to Scheduled Caste parental opposition to educating all their daughters, which was common in all secondary sources reviewed. These were the real and unseen expenses on education, genuine fear of distance and travel to school, early marriage norms deeply entrenched in the system, tremendous pressure of the community on the women’s roles, and a general lack of confidence that education would take the girl, Scheduled Caste out of the vicious early marriage cycle. Together, both reveal how inextricable beliefs are from barriers in this context, how each-hungry and how each-sustaining each other in these communities, day-by-day, quietly.

Conclusion: This work started with a simple but serious concern. What is the reason why most parents of SCs in Uttar Dinajpur District are not willing to allow their daughters to receive full education, and what is the role of the socio-economic status and deeply rooted beliefs of the community in this issue? Having sifted through the secondary literature, it does not seem that there is a single answer, just a more complex and honest awareness of the problem that has long existed. Barriers and beliefs should not be viewed as independent issues that can be dealt with independently. They are all from the same soil. If a family is poor, socially excluded, and their community has not benefited much from investing in a girl’s education, the following beliefs are inescapable. They don’t stem from poor parenting and cultural dogma. They are based on a repetition of experiences across the generations without adequate accommodation of difference.

The importance of Uttar Dinajpur district is higher than the one it gets in general educational policy discussions. Its unique set of geographical isolation, economic and social fragilities and gender belief system make it a situation that requires specific solutions, rather than solutions that are taken from another more connected or more developed district and simply imposed in unaltered form. The good news about this study is that there is evidence that attitudes can change when the circumstances change. Educated mothers, more stable income, better schools, and safer schools all result in increased parental support for daughters’ education. The support for daughters’ schooling counts, and there are indicators of increased support as

mothers become more educated, as income is more stable, as schools are closer, and as schools are safer. The fact that they can change – we saw that in place already in these communities. The missing part has been the consistent, sustained and real support from a system and institutions designed specifically for them. Until this support is concrete and sustainable, barriers and beliefs will remain and take their toll on girls, preventing them from receiving the education they deserve.

Recommendations: The following recommendations are suggested based on patterns and barriers which could be consistently observed in the literature reviewed; they are aimed at the actual circumstances of the Scheduled Castes in Uttar Dinajpur rather than reiteration of all contentions that are contained in policy documents. The real indirect costs of sending girls to school—such as travel, materials, clothing and more—must be covered and not merely symbolically, as it is those invisible costs that covertly put an end to the school day for girls long before it happens. The needs of the parents for their children’s safety would be directly met if there were residential school facilities or well-monitored hostel facilities near the Scheduled Caste settlements. If residential school facilities or well-monitored hostel facilities are provided near the Scheduled Caste settlements, it would directly tackle the concern of parents for their safety, something that is hard to shift through only awareness building. Scheduled Caste community level dialogue programmes with the participation of Scheduled Caste parents, particularly fathers, imparting honest information about the education of girls, should be organised regularly by trusted voices in the community, not through outsiders. It is important that serious attention is given to the education of the mothers of the Scheduled castes as adults, so that there could be a generational change in the attitude of the family towards the value and education of daughters within the family.

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