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Education Among Scheduled Tribes

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The Indian Constitution identifies for special consideration certain ethnic minority groups, traditionally referred to as tribes or tribals, as Scheduled Tribes (STs) who constitute around 8 per cent of the total population of the country. There are 573 STs living in different parts of the country. Most of the tribal communities have their own languages different from the language spoken in the state where they are located. There are more than 270 such languages. The tribal languages in India belong to all major language families among which the Austric, the Dravidian, Tibeto-Chinese, and Indo European families are the dominant ones.

One of the distinguishing features of STs is that the majority of them live in scattered habitations located in interior, remote, and inaccessible hilly and forest areas of the country. Nearly 22 per cent of tribal habitations have less than 100 population and more than 40 per cent have 100 to less than 300 people, while others have less than 500 people. Though tribals constitute only 8 per cent of Indian population, they constitute a majority in several states and union territories and sizeable population in others. In particular, they constitute an overwhelming majority in Mizoram (94.75 per cent), Lakshadweep (93.15 per cent), Nagaland (87.70 per cent), and Meghalaya (85.53 per cent). However, the states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal account for 83 per cent of the total tribal population, even though non-tribals constitute the majority in these states.

POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES

Recognizing that the STs count among the most deprived and marginalized sections of Indian society, a host of welfare and developmental measures have been initiated for their social and economic development. In this regard, particular reference has to be made to the tribal sub-plan approach which came into existence as the main strategy from the Fifth Five Year Plan. Along with core economic sectors, elementary education has been accorded priority in the tribal sub-Plan approach. Elementary education is considered important, not only because of constitutional obligation, but as a crucial input for total development of tribal communities, particularly to build confidence among the tribes to deal with outsiders on equal terms. Since primacy was accorded to elementary education, a broad policy frame for education was adopted in the tribal sub-Plans according equal importance to quantitative and qualitative aspects of education.

A second important development in the policy towards education of tribals came with recommendations of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1986 which specified, among other things, the following:

- Priority will be accorded to opening primary schools in tribal areas.
- There is need to develop curricula and devise instructional material in tribal language at the initial stages with arrangements for switchover to regional languages.
- Promising ST youths will be encouraged to take up teaching in tribal areas.
- *Ashram* schools/residential schools will be established on a large scale in tribal areas.
- Incentive schemes will be formulated for the STs, keeping in view their special needs and lifestyle.

The unique feature of the policy is its recognition of the heterogeneity and diversity of tribal areas. The policy also proposed the transformation of the structure of primary education with special emphasis on improving

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access in tribal areas. The policy has also underlined the importance of instruction through the mother tongue for effective teaching and encouraged incorporating locally relevant content and curriculum, besides emphasizing the localized production of textbooks in local dialects. Based on these considerations, the norms for establishing primary schools wei;e relaxed to suit tribal areas in order to improve access to education. For instance, Andhra Pradesh has gone to the extent of establishing schools in habitations where there are even twenty school-age children; Madhya Pradesh has steadily decreased population size norms in order to open schools in habitations with 200 population. However, in spite of such relaxation of norms many tribal localities are still without school, as they do not meet even the relaxed criteria.

PROGRESS IN LITERACY

Literacy is an important and primary index of educational development. This section provides data on the actual position of literacy among the tribals in terms of decadal growth rates, gap between tribal and non-tribal population (see Figure 7.1), inter-tribal variations etc. It will also highlight inter-state, inter-group, and gender variations in tribal literacy.

falls well below the national average. In fact, data reveal that STs behind even SCs in educational progress.

It is found that the degree and level of educational development have been quite uneven among different states and among different segments of population within any given state. The data indicate that some of the states with higher tribal concentration in relation to their total population have done exceedingly well in terms of higher literacy rate. States in the north-eastern region of India like Mizoram, Nagaland, and Meghalaya fall in this category. But in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, and Andhra Pradesh, which are inhabited by much larger numbers of tribals than the north-eastern states, tribal literacy continues to be very low. In 1971 tribal literacy in Madhya Pradesh was at 7.62 per cent, increasing marginally to 10.68 per cent by 1981 and standing at 21.54 per cent as per the 1991 census figures. The figures are similar for Bihar, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh. In fact, Andhra Pradesh has the lowest tribal literacy rate in the country at 17.16 in 1991.

But what is important is the growth of the literacy rate between 1981 and 1991. The growth rate was steady between 1971 and 1981, but increased significantly during 1981-91. The trend is visible even in relatively backward states like Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. Another

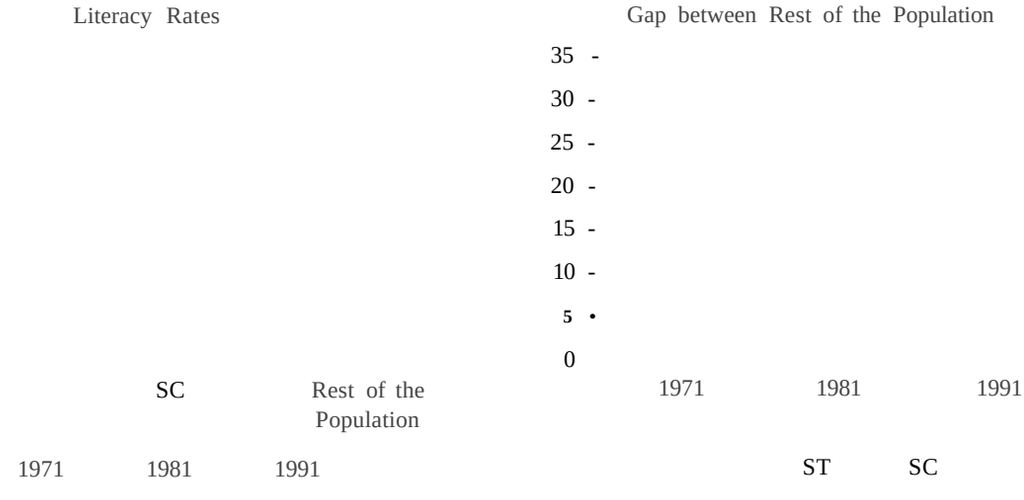

FIGURE 7.1: Gap between Tribals and the Rest of the Population

Source: Census 1971, 1981, 1991.

The data on literacy from 1971 to 1991 show that literacy rate for STs has gone up from a low of 11.30 in 1971 to 29.50 in 1991. But the increase in literacy rate does not express overall growth of educational standard. In fact, even though in absolute numbers the illiterates have increased over the years, the gap between ST and non-ST population has also increased from 22.50 to 33.05 between 1971 and 1991. Even today tribal literacy factor that needs mention is that though educationally developed states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka have higher general literacy rates, they are way behind the smaller and tribal-concentrated states in terms of tribal literacy rates. On the whole, disparity among various states in terms of tribal literacy rates is pretty high, ranging between 82.27 per cent in Mizoram and 17.16 per cent in Andhra Pradesh.

LEARNER ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS

Almost all the studies on learner achievement levels in India have shown that tribal students in primary classes have lower achievement compared to non-tribals (see Govinda and Varghese, 1993, Varghese 1994, Sujatha 1998, Prakash *et al.* 1998). The low achievement levels among tribals were attributed to school-related variables as in the case of non-tribal students. However, tribal students had additional disadvantages arising out of social and locational factors (see Sujatha 1998). A silver lining in this regard is that the achievement levels of tribal children showed slight improvement during the period from 1993 to 1998 as revealed by the baseline studies conducted under the DPEP (see Prakash 1998). Table 7.2 provides data on achievement levels of ST students in three states.

TABLE 7.2
Achievement Levels (class I) of ST Students in Different States

Districts	*1994-5*		*1997-8*	
	Language	*Mathematics*	*Language*	*Mathematics*
	MADHYA PRADESH			
Satna	3.65	1.58	5.58	3.72
Rewa	4.18	2.74	4.58	4.51
Sidhi	4.54	2.35	5.35	5.04
Tikamgarh	3.93	2.13	5.70	7.12
Chattarpur	3.39	2.16	5.15	5.29
Panna	2.37	1.45	4.60	5.24
	MAHARASHTRA			
Aurangabad	5.21	3.24	7.24	6.35
Nanded	3.79	2.79	5.67	5.02
Parbhani	5.46	3.14	6.27	6.27
	ASSAM			
Darrang			12.32	7.15
Dhubri			12.12	10.11
Karbi Anglong			NA	NA
Morigan			15.12	10.34

Source: NCERT (1996) and Prakash *et al.* (1998).

However, this marginal improvement is not sufficient to achieve educational parity in terms of levels of achievement between tribal and non-tribal students and it must be admitted that tribal students still have low achievement levels and fall a long way behind the expected levels. The tribal and non-tribal gap in achieving competency is very big, to say the least. This is a major concern and requires strategic intervention.

PROBLEMS OF TRIBAL EDUCATION

This review clearly underlines that in spite of constitutional guarantees and persistent efforts, tribal communities continue to lag behind the general population in education. The reasons for this can be categorized as external, internal, and socio-economic and psychological. The external constraints are related to problems and difficulties at levels of policy, planning, implementation, and administration. Internal constraints refer to problems associated with the school system, content, curriculum, medium of instruction, pedagogy, academic supervision, monitoring, and teacher-related problems. The third set of problems relates to social, economic, and cultural background of tribals and psychological problems of first-generation learners.

External Constraints

The perspective adopted for educational development among tribal communities fails to adequately address the specific disadvantages characterizing tribal population. For instance, the population and distance norms formed by the government have not been beneficial to tribal locations because of their sparse population and sporadic residential patterns. Further, in formulating policies and programmes for tribal education it is essential to understand the complex realities of tribal life and the expectation of tribals from the system, and this has never been done either by the tribal welfare department or by the education department. Consequently, no worthwhile policy for tribal education has been formed.

One of the major constraints of tribal education at planning level is the adoption of a dual system of administration. The tribal welfare department deals with tribal life and culture and administers development work at the local level, including education. But the tribal welfare department lacks expertise in educational planning and administration in general, and academic supervision and monitoring in particular. On the other hand, the education department is the sole authority for planning of educational development at state level. It formulates implementation guidelines and instructions regarding curriculum, textbooks, teacher recruitment, transfer policies, and so on. In this the department tends to formulate uniform policies for the entire state. The school calendar is a case in point, where vacations and holidays cater to the needs of the formal school set up in a non-tribal context, with little consideration for local context and tribals festivals. This lack of sensitivity to their problems and failure in understanding tribal social reality, coupled with faulty selection and appointment of teachers in tribal areas, have resulted in poor performance and teacher absenteeism in tribal schools.

Under the system of dual administration, absence of coordination and complimentarity as well as inadequate scope for reciprocal use of respective expertise and

experiences between the two departments has invariably stunted educational development among tribals.

InternalConstraints

The internal problems of tribal education refer to the quality of school provision, suitable teachers, relevance of content and curriculum, medium of instruction, pedagogy, and special supervision. A majority of schools in tribal areas are without basic infrastructure facilities. Normally, school buildings in tribal areas have thatched roofs, dilapidated walls, and non-plastered floors. Research evidence shows that a large number of tribal schools do not have teaching-learning materials, or even blackboards. In tribal areas the opening of a school is equated with the posting of a teacher and same is the case with 'ashram' schools. It is found that in most of ashram schools which are residential in nature, there is no space for the children to sleep. Consequently, the classroom turns into the dormitory and vice versa. Due to lack of minimum sanitary provisions, it is not uncommon to find that many children studying in ashram schools are afflicted with contagious diseases like scabies and diarrhoea, leading to high drop-out rates. Schools in tribal areas just function with bare minimum facilities.

CONTENT AND CURRICULUM

Though the demand for changing the content and curriculum to suit the tribal context has been an old one, no serious effort has been made in this direction in any state, except for some sporadic pilot projects. The uniform structure and transaction of curriculum has put tribal children at a disadvantage. In respect of pedagogy, it has been found that the rigid systems of formal schooling, which emphasize discipline, routine norms, teacher-centred instruction, etc. have made the children wary of school. This goes against the culture of free interaction and absence of force as embedded in tribal ethos and culture prevalent at home. This has led to sharp division between home and school leading to lack of interest among the children towards school, and research findings have shown this as a major factor behind non-enrolment.

Another area is the inherent fear of tribal children towards the teacher, and their inability to establish a communication link with the teacher and this is reflected in low attendance and high dropout rates. This could be tackled to a great extent by using the regional language as the medium of instruction. The Constitution of India allows the use of tribal dialect (mother tongue) as the medium of instruction in case the population of the said tribe is more than one lakh. But this has not been adopted on the grounds of feasibility and viability of introducing and sustaining such a change. In recent years, some efforts have been made for preparing primers in tribal dialects but again they have been nullified in the context of inter-tribal rivalry, hierarchy, etc, and also, being on a very small scale, are incapable of influencing mainstream practices.

Socio-economic and Cultural Constraints

In a broad sense, these socio-economic and cultural factors can be outlined as poverty and poor economic conditions, social customs, cultural ethos, lack of awareness and understanding of the value of formal education, conflict and gap between the home and school, etc. Studies on educational deprivation of tribals have inevitably linked it to their poor economic condition and poverty. The main occupation of tribals is agriculture, practised either through shifting cultivation or terrace cultivation where productivity remains very low. Consequently, children play an important role, contributing directly or indirectly to family income by participating in the family occupation and household works like cattle grazing and fuel and fodder collection, etc.

Even though elementary education is deemed free and additional incentives are given to children, in practice, it is not free due to several reasons. First, the incentive schemes do not have full coverage, and thus, have limited value at community level. Second, many of the benefits do not reach the beneficiaries. Third, even though incentives like slates and uniforms are given, they are of poor quality and do not reach in time, thus nullifying the entire purpose. It should be noted that the impoverished economic status of tribals makes even the small amount of private expenditure involved in procuring writing material, clothing, etc a serious burden on the family. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising if education is not given priority. In an economy dominated by struggle for survival, options are limited. Since education does not provide any visible and immediate benefit and tribals do not see beyond their present state, the participation of tribal children in education also becomes limited. Another reason for low participation is the opportunity cost involved, as the majority of non-enrolled children are required to work in households or family occupations. Even if the economic contribution of children is indirect, they certainly facilitate the participation of parents in economic activity.

In recent years the efforts of the government have been directed towards improving economic conditions of tribes by introducing various developmental programmes and schemes, mostly related to agriculture, horticulture, and cattle rearing, backed by subsidies and monetary and non-monetary inputs. A critical analysis of development

programmes and their effect on tribal households shows that till tribal households reach a threshold level of income and land size, the economic development programmes can come into conflict with other activities like education. In a way it can be said that these development programmes seem to be adversely affecting the education of tribal children (see Sujatha 1994).

Box 7.1 provides the specific example of conflict between education and short-term economics among tribals in Andhra Pradesh.

Box 7.1
Development versus **Education**

In order to introduce permanent cultivation among shifting cultivators, the Government initiated orange and coffee plantation under the horticulture scheme in Andhra Pradesh. For this, the households were given two acres of forest land, and orange plants were supplied free of cost. For taking care of the plants, they were paid Rs 100 per month in the form of rice and other things. With some persuasion the tribals accepted the scheme as it had visible monetary benefit as well as getting some more land. But accepting a new scheme in addition to their traditional cultivation, means demand for more labour, which, in turn, brings change in the structure in the family labour. Work distribution pattern among the members of the household plays a crucial role in the success of the new scheme that they have accepted. This situation comes into conflict with the children's participation in education as their help in household work or in cultivation becomes essential. In another incident, a sheep rearing project was introduced and some of the tribal households were given a unit of sheep. Usually axe fell on education of children. For the household, direct benefit from sheep rearing is more attractive to improve their economic condition than the long-term benefits of education.

Source: Sujatha (1994).

Poor health is another major hindrance in the promotion and participation of tribal children in education. Contagious diseases like scabies, eye infection, malaria, and diarrhoea are common in tribal areas, and also affect children's attendance at school. Further, some tribal communities are seasonal migrants and this leads to absenteeism among their children and makes it difficult for them to effectively benefit from schooling.

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

Education of tribals cannot be left to short-term Plan strategies. It is important that planners take a long-term view which is embedded in a meaningful policy framework. Following are some important points emerging from the review here.

• Emphasis should be on quality and equity rather than quantity as has been the case in the past. The prime focus should be on provision of quality education that makes tribal communities economically effective and independent.

• In the tribal context, it is essential that the school schedule be prepared as per local requirement rather than following a directive from the state. It has been found that vacations. and holidays are planned without taking into consideration local contexts, and thereby, unnecessarily antagonize tribal communities and keep them out of school.

• Though it has been highlighted time and again, no concrete step has been taken to provide locally relevant material to tribal students. Availability of locally relevant materials will not only facilitate faster learning but also help children develop a sense of affiliation to school.

• In order to make education effective and sustainable, building partnership between the community and the government is important. Results from pilot projects in Andhra Pradesh show that community partnership not only augments state expenditure on education but also guarantees supervision and monitoring, thus addressing an intractable problem for the state.

• Environment building is of immense importance in the context of educational development among tribal communities. Community awareness and community mobilization, which are its core elements, should receive adequate importance and attention.

• Decentralization of education management is another aspect that needs special consideration in the context of tribal areas. In fact, considering the geographical terrain and communication problems in tribal areas, it is crucial to restructure the existing system of educational management. Adaptation of structures such as school complexes and VECs to tribal areas needs careftil consideration.

• Skill development, competency building, and teachers motivation also need to be strengthened for sustaining educational development. The teacher should be made the centre of educational transformation, and therefore, must remain the primary facilitator.

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