

Isolated Communities and Ignored Claims: Tribal Children's Right to Education in India

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Indigenous communities of India are commonly referred to as tribal or *adivasi* communities and are recognised as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of India. Although the Constitution does not define Scheduled Tribes as such, it designates these communities as those which are scheduled in accordance with Article 342 of the Constitution. According to Article 342 of the Constitution, the Scheduled Tribes are the tribes or tribal communities or part of or groups within these tribes and tribal communities which have been declared as such by the President through a public notification. The criteria followed for specification of a community, as scheduled tribe are indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness. At present, 533 tribes in India have been notified under Article 342 of the Constitution with the largest number of 62 tribes belonging to the State of Orissa.

Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile:

As per the 1991 Census, the Scheduled Tribes (ST) account for 67.76 million representing 8.08 percent of the country's population. Of this, 1.32 million (1.95%) belong to Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG) who are more marginalised than the ST population. The ST population is estimated to have reached 88.8 million in 2001 which is 8.6% of the country's total population in 2001. The Scheduled Tribes are spread across the country and reside mainly in forest and hilly regions. The proportion of Scheduled Tribes within general population varies across States/Union Territories and indicates heavy concentration in certain parts such as Mizoram (94.7%), Lakshwadeep (93.2%), Meghalaya (85.5%), Dadra and Nagar Haveli (78.9%). States of Kerala (1.1%), Tamil Nadu (1%) and Uttar Pradesh (0.2%) have a low percentage of Scheduled Tribe population in comparison to the general population. Since Independence, the percentage of ST population has steadily increased following the growth in general population.

Table 1. Schedule Tribe Population over the years

Year	Total Population (in millions)	ST Population (in millions)	Percentage of the Total Population
1951	361.1	19.1	5.29
1961	439.2	30.1	6.85
1971	548.2	38.0	6.93
1981	685.2	51.6	7.53
1991	846.3	67.76	8.08

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It is also important to note that a large majority of tribals in India are landless and do not have a sustainable source of livelihood. The 1991 Census figures reveal that 42.02 percent of the Scheduled Tribe population were main workers (those who were employed for more than 183 days in the preceding year) of whom 54.50 percent were cultivators and 32.69 percent agricultural labourers. Thus, about 87 percent of the main workers from these communities were engaged in primary sector activities. While a majority of those employed do not receive even the statutory minimum wages, tribal women are found to be doubly exploited since they are paid even less than the tribal men. It is thus not surprising that poverty is widely prevalent among tribal population in India. Even when the overall levels of poverty for tribal population have reduced between 1993-94 to 1999-2000 from 51.94% to 45.86% among the rural tribal population and 41.14% to 34.75% among the urban tribal population, two important trends can be observed. Firstly, the rate of decline in poverty among the STs is much lower than that among the general population and secondly, the gap between poverty rates among tribal and general population is widening. A number of Scheduled Tribes living below poverty line have been provided economic assistance to enable them to rise above the poverty-line. However, this assistance has decreased from Rs. 9.98 lakh during 1999-2000 to 8.81 lakh during 2000-2001.

The sex ratio among the STs, although significantly higher than the general population, has been slowly declining. While there were 982 tribal females for every 1000 tribal males in 1971, the 1991 Census shows that there are only 972 females for every 1000 tribal males. This could be indicative of their poor access to health services.

Educational Status of Tribals in India:

Tribal children, like several marginalised groups of children in India, are trapped in an intergenerational vicious cycle of poverty, illiteracy and deprivation. This is evident in extremely poor adult literacy rates which are reproduced as low education levels among the children from ST communities. This section presents some key data points on educational status of ST communities as a whole as well as schooling status of tribal children.

The literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes is abysmally low at around 29.60 percent, as against the national average of 52.21 percent. A review of literacy rates among ST population in comparison with that of the general population indicates a growing gap between literacy rates of these two communities.

Table 2. Literacy rates (in percentages) of ST and Total population (1971-1991)

Category	1971	1981	1991
Total Population (including ST population)	29.45	36.23	52.21
ST Population	11.30	16.35	29.60
Gap between ST and Total population	18.15	19.88	22.61

It is also important to note that the 1991 literacy rates for STs are almost equal to the literacy rates of the total population in 1971!

Female literacy is another significant indicator of educational development within any social group. Research studies have shown the importance of female literacy and education in uplifting the socio-economic parameters of a given society. In the context of tribal women in India, illiteracy is so highly prevalent that their engagement with the mainstream society is seriously limited. While more than three-quarters of ST women are illiterate, 77 districts in India have tribal female literacy rates lower than ten percent and 14 districts have less than three percent tribal female literacy rate.

Inter-state differences in the literacy rates of tribal population is evident with tribes from North Eastern States of India showing high literacy rates. The highest literacy rate among tribals in Mizoram (82.73%) is attributed to a spread of Christian missionary educational institutions and a strong matrilineal family system among the Khasi and Garo tribes belonging to the State. Low literacy rates are seen among the tribals from Madhya Pradesh (21.54%) and Orissa (22.31%).

Table 3. Sex-wise Gross Enrolment Ratio of ST and Total Population (1990-91 to 1999-2000)

	1990-1991		1999-2000	
	Class 1-5	Class 1-8	Class 1-5	Class 1-8
Total Population	100.1	62.1	94.9	58.8
Boys	114.0	76.6	104.1	67.2
Girls	85.5	47.8	85.2	49.7
ST Population	103.4	39.7	97.7	58.0
Boys	126.8	51.3	112.7	70.8
Girls	78.6	27.5	82.7	44.8
Gap - Total	(+) 3.3	(-) 22.4	(+) 2.8	(-) 0.8
Boys	(+) 12.8	(-) 25.3	(+) 8.6	(+) 3.6
Girls	(-) 6.9	(-) 20.3	(-) 2.5	(-) 4.9

The above data shows that the gross enrolment ratio for Classes 1-5 and Classes 1-8 has declined from 1990-91 to 1999-2000 for the total population, but in the case of ST population it has decreased for Classes 1-5 (except for girls) but has improved for Classes 1-8. But there still remains an almost five percentage point gap between the enrolment of ST girls and non-ST girls wherein less than half of ST girls are not even enrolled in schools. Yet, this large scale enrolment of ST children in schools has been on account of wide scale government efforts to universalise education and a growing demand among the tribal communities to access formal education system, perhaps as a means to achieve inclusion in the mainstream. However, this has had its own ramifications. While schools as institutions and teachers as critical agents have remained fundamentally unchanged, the school atmosphere has not always become conducive to accept

and retain these children in schools. As we shall see later in this paper, tribal children's school experience is an important variable which determines whether the child continues to be in school or decides to drop out.

Table 4. Drop out rates (in percent) among ST and Total Population (1990-91 to 1998-99)

	Classes 1-5		Classes 1-8		Classes 1-10	
	1990-91	1998-99	1990-91	1998-99	1990-91	1998-99
Total	42.60	39.74	60.90	56.82	71.34	67.44
ST	62.52	57.36	78.57	72.80	85.01	82.96
Gap	19.92	17.62	17.67	15.98	13.67	15.52

The problem of drop outs persists among all categories of children in India. However, in the context of children studying in Classes 1-10 the gap between the ST and total population in reduction of drop-outs has widened from 1990-91 to 1998-99. The reduction in the drop out rates could be because of various incentive schemes run by the State Governments for education of ST children such as those providing free books, uniforms and scholarships in government schools. But schemes such as those providing for hostels for ST boys and girls are not implemented fully by the States owing to lack of financial resources and therefore fewer ST children pursue high school education. The policy of reserving special seats for ST students at higher education levels is not widely availed since a large number of ST students do not even reach those levels and drop out at lower levels of school education. Even the *Ashram schools* (residential schools for ST boys and girls) started by the Government in 1990-91 are poorly maintained and sometimes lack even the basic facilities. Given the low levels of literacy among the ST population, several children from these communities happen to be 'first generation learners' and in the absence of State support for helping them cope with studies, very many children drop out of the schools. This disproportionately low representation of ST children at higher levels of education compounds the existing disparities among Indian society.

Lack of proactive governance in favour of the STs is not linked only to lack of resources. Governmental indifference and lack of political will are largely responsible for the callous state of affairs. The unutilised amount for tribal welfare for the years 1998-2001¹ for all the states combined was Rs. 40546.46 lakhs. States with high proportion of ST population also had high amounts of unutilised funds with Bihar (Rs. 8113.26 lakhs), Jharkhand (Rs. 4742.62 lakhs), Madhya Pradesh (Rs. 4721.61 lakhs) and Gujarat (Rs. 3721.72 lakhs) topping the order.

The School Experience²:

At school, the experiences of tribal children range from discrimination to a sense of complete alienation. Students from ST communities encounter a series of obstacles including commuting long distances to school in hostile environmental conditions, abuses and discrimination from teachers and fellow students from non-tribal backgrounds, difficulty in comprehending the language of instruction and negotiating space for themselves which was denied historically.

Children's denominational identities have always affected their school experiences. Ideally, the school teacher must play a vital role in supporting the struggles of first-generation learners. But it is found that although there is formal inclusion in the mainstream education system in the sense that children are officially enrolled, the teachers are often found to question the 'educability' of tribal children, revealing that nothing much has changed in the perceptions held about the 'other' by teachers who are generally drawn from mainstream social groups.

Research shows that tribal children are often subjected to overt discrimination by non-tribal upper caste school teachers who view them as 'slow learners' unable to learn despite several repetitions; as 'unclean' and are therefore given tasks of sweeping and swabbing the schools unlike non-tribal upper caste children who may be asked to fetch water or lock the school. Teachers also demean tribal children by calling their parents 'drunken', with no interest in schools and education. Untouchability is also found to prevail in schools, where upper caste teachers and students refuse to drink water from the same tap as the tribal children before washing it thoroughly. Even play activities and school transactions are sometimes segregated on the basis of these identities. The tribal children are repeatedly subjected to verbal abuse at the hands of upper caste teachers and this has a critical impact on the way these first generation students view themselves as learners.

Since the tribal languages are distinctly different from the medium of instruction in schools (which is usually the respective State language) tribal children often find it extremely difficult to cope with their studies and homework. This lack of language skills acts as a serious impediment when the teacher is a non-tribal and makes no effort to link the two linguistic experiences for the child. Aspirations among tribal children are also low considering that there are not many formally educated persons in such communities. The inability to secure jobs amongst tribals who have completed formal education have lead some to get disillusioned with the education system and question the futility of spending several years struggling to get educated. Some consider school educated children as unfit to carry out their hereditary occupations thereby rendering them 'useless' in their traditional lives. Yet, the motivation of a large number of tribal children to walk hours to reach school, tolerate the rebuke of teachers and fellow students, their efforts to identify with a language and curriculum that is alien to their own life worlds and their struggles to break free of their historical marginalisation is definitely striking.

A Question of Tribal Rights:

In several societies, children's rights are intrinsically linked to respect for human rights and it would be almost impractical to separate rights of children from those of their families and communities. Fulfilment of third generation of rights i.e. group or community rights is often imperative considering that it is not children's rights alone but those of an entire community which are under extreme risk. By bestowing children from such social groups rights that are not enjoyed by their families or communities, superficial lines get drawn between children and their families or communities while making a farce of realising children's rights. It also presumes that children's rights can be respected while the rights of their parents and communities are

persistently violated. However, as we shall see below, children's rights remain unfulfilled so long as the position of their social group is not improved. In the Indian context too, tribal children's rights are more likely to get realised if rights of tribal communities are holistically recognised and fulfilled. The following problems faced by tribal communities in India make it extremely difficult for tribal children to gain entry and sustain within the mainstream education system.

Displacement: Forced or voluntary eviction of tribals from their homes and habitats has been a serious problem since Independence. Large scale projects such as large dams, power plants, industrial units, large mining projects undertaken on tribal lands for the 'larger public good' very often provide little to the displaced communities. For years, questions have been raised about the unsatisfactory manner in which they have been rehabilitated. Research shows that between 1951 and 1990, a population of 21.3 million persons have been displaced in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa. Of this, 8.54 million are tribals (40 percent of the total) and of those only 2.12 million (24.8 percent) tribals have been resettled so far.³ In the absence of appropriate rehabilitation, displaced communities are uprooted and forced to migrate to newer areas. While they may settle down on forestlands in the new villages or in urban slums in case they migrate to cities, their settlement is considered illegal and they are therefore denied even the basic civic amenities. Children belonging to families of displaced tribal families are never able to continue schooling even if they were enrolled initially, and usually end up in wage employment in order to support the family's fresh set of challenges.

Land Alienation: Among tribal communities, land and its natural resources are sacrosanct and hold significant place in their socio-cultural and religious life. It is also the main source of livelihood and Minor Forest Produce (MFP) is known to help several communities to survive. Given the vulnerability of tribal communities in India, several of them have had to part with their treasured resource for reasons ranging from acquisition of land for public purposes, encroachments by non-tribals or 'outsiders', forcible evictions, etc. The Ministry of Rural Development data shows that as many as 4.65 lakh cases of alienation of tribal land covering an area of 9.17 lakh acres were registered in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan and Tripura in January 1999. Of these, only two lakh cases were disposed in favour of 1.56 lakh tribal families covering an area of 5.31 lakh acres. Among the states, land alienation is high in Andhra Pradesh (2.79 lakh acres), Madhya Pradesh (1.58 lakh acres), Karnataka (1.30 lakh acres), and Gujarat (1.16 lakh acres). An absence of political and administrative will to identify and hand over alienated land back to the tribals is considered to be a major obstacle in ensuring that the tribal communities get what is due to them. While on the one hand, tribals continue to lose their land to so-called large developmental projects, without being compensated or restored with lands adequately, questions are being asked about the so-called benefits of these projects percolating to the tribals themselves. In fact, due to lack of education and vocational training amongst tribals, projects set up in tribal areas rarely absorb the local tribals in employment. In many cases, tribals migrate at different times of the year to find employment. Children from such migrating families

are either never enrolled in schools due to frequent transfers, or end up discontinuing education for the period that they are away which has an adverse impact on their educational attainments.

Conclusion:

Tribal communities in India have been historically deprived of access to resources and opportunities, including the opportunity to get educated. The present efforts of the Indian government to bring these children into formal schools fails at two levels. Firstly, because it is not able to enrol all tribal children and provide them access to good quality functional schools. In some states, the government has started providing alternate schools run by untrained local youth which is opposed by many education activists, since it is a poor and sub-standard system given out to those who are already marginalised. Secondly, even when tribal children are enrolled into schools, the education system besides doling out some incentives does not do much to improve the school environment which will treat these first-generation learners with respect and dignity. Instead, tribal children are made to put up with an offensive and insulting climate that continuously discriminates and alienates. For such historically deprived communities, providing access to education is simply not enough, the government has to take a proactive role in creating overall conditions and opportunities that will facilitate their transition and breaking of the intergenerational cycle of poverty and illiteracy. A sensitive cadre of teachers and bureaucracy is definitely required to make the difference. At another level, educational deprivation must be seen in the context of overall deprivation of the community and hence emphasis must be placed on improving the situation of tribal communities in general. Restoring land and livelihoods, empowering women, providing basic civic amenities such as fuel, water and sanitation are pre-conditions to advancements of rights of tribal children. Unless the government undertakes urgent steps to address these issues, its proclamations on child rights would remain examples of empty rhetoric and its actions would effectively continue to exclude those already sidelined. Following the increasing gap between the rich and the poor in the country, the gap between the tribal and non-tribal children is also widening rapidly, thereby further isolating the isolated. Respecting their claims at the outset should set the ball rolling in the right direction.

End notes:

¹ Statement Referred to in Reply to Parts (a) & (b) of Rajya Sabha Unstarred Question No. 2333 for Answer on 15.4.2002

² For elaborate discussion on school experiences, see essays in Education Inclusion and Exclusion: Indian and South African Perspectives, IDS Bulletin Vol 34 Number 1 January 2003.

³ Planning Commission of India, 'Tenth Five Year Plans 2002-2007' New Delhi: Government of India.