



Bridging Educational Gaps: Challenges and Opportunities in Elementary Education for Scheduled Tribe Students in Tripura

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Abstract:

Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities in Tripura face persistent educational challenges that impact enrollment, and learning outcomes. They are known as marginalized and economically disadvantaged group. This paper examines the barriers to elementary education among tribal students, including language, socio-economic status, teacher quality, infrastructure, and cultural factors. Using qualitative analysis from primary interviews and secondary sources, the study highlights gaps in policy implementation and explores strategies to enhance inclusive education. Recommendations include mother-tongue instruction, recruitment of tribal teachers, culturally responsive curricula, and community engagement to bridge educational disparities.

Keywords: Elementary Education, Scheduled Tribe, Marginalized.

Introduction:

Tripura, a small state in North-Eastern India, covers 10,491 km² and borders Bangladesh on three sides, with Assam and Mizoram to the east. As per the 2011 Census, its population was 3.67 million, with Scheduled Tribes constituting over 30%. The Kokborok-speaking Tripuri tribe is the most prominent among the 19 recognized tribes (Census of India, 2011).

Historically, tribal communities have faced social exclusion, economic marginalization, and limited access to education. Literacy and human capital formation are essential drivers of development, with ST literacy in Tripura at 56.5%, higher than the national average of 47.1%. Elementary education plays a foundational role, fostering literacy, numeracy, social skills, and life competencies that prepare children for secondary education and societal participation.

Scheduled Tribes and Marginalization:

Scheduled Tribes (STs) are constitutionally recognized communities historically disadvantaged in education, employment, and social status. Article 342 of the Indian Constitution allows the President, in consultation with the Governor, to notify tribal groups recognized as STs.

Marginalization, including economic, cultural, and linguistic exclusion, affects tribal participation in education. In Tripura, this is reflected in restricted school access, poor infrastructure, and social biases, highlighting the need for targeted measures to promote equity and inclusive education.

Elementary Education in Tripura:

Elementary education spans eight years, including primary (Classes I–V) and upper primary (Classes VI–VIII). This stage builds literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills while fostering curiosity, creativity, and social development. For tribal children, elementary schooling is a bridge to overcome socio-economic disadvantages and integrate into mainstream education.

Literature Review: Studies on tribal education highlight multiple barriers:

Leighton (2010) emphasized mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) for literacy and second-language acquisition.

Biswas (2011) linked low attendance to poverty, malnutrition, and agricultural work, with Mid-Day Meal (MDM) programs positively influencing retention.

Debbarma (2016) noted insufficient training, absenteeism, and weak in-service support. Recruiting local tribal teachers improves comprehension and motivation.

M. B. Tripura (2018) stressed the role of parents, elders, and School Management Committees in accountability and contextualized learning.

B. Tripura (2017) highlighted the shortage of Kokborok textbooks, underscoring the need for culturally responsive content.

Overall, tribal education outcomes are influenced by interconnected issues of poverty, language, teacher competence, and community engagement.

Methodology:

This qualitative study combines primary and secondary data. Informal interviews were conducted with students, parents, and teachers to explore challenges in elementary education. Secondary sources include census reports, published research, government reports, and school statistics (UDISE, 2020–21).

Delimitation: The study focuses on elementary-level education for ST students in Tripura and does not cover higher education or other states.

Findings and Discussion:

1. Language Barriers:

Many tribal children lack proficiency in Bengali or English, limiting comprehension and academic progress. Mother-tongue instruction is critical in the early stages.

2.Infrastructure Deficiencies:

Schools in tribal areas often lack classrooms, libraries, learning materials, and trained teachers, affecting the quality of education.

3.Parental Attitudes:

Some tribal parents prioritize labor or household responsibilities over schooling, and early marriage of girls constrains educational continuity. Awareness campaigns can improve parental engagement.

4.Teacher Distribution and Motivation:

Unequal teacher allocation and low motivation reduce instructional quality. Recruiting tribal teachers and enhancing professional development is essential.

5.Economic Constraints:

Poverty restricts access to nutrition, healthcare, and study materials, negatively influencing learning outcomes.

6.Social and Cultural Factors:

Cultural differences, isolation, and low community involvement reduce participation. Integrating local traditions and engaging tribal elders can enhance school relevance.

Government Initiatives:

Tripura has implemented several programs:

1.Mid-Day Meal Scheme: Improves nutrition and attendance.

2.Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao: Promotes girls' education.

3.Samagra Shiksha: Integrated program for enrollment and learning outcomes.

4.Nutan Disha: Enhances elementary learning outcomes.

5.School Mergers & Transport: Consolidates low-enrollment schools.

6.NIPUN Bharat Mission: Ensures foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3.

Scholarships, hostels, and Ashram schools further support tribal students and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

Recommendations:

1. Implement mother-tongue instruction at elementary levels.
2. Recruit qualified tribal teachers familiar with local languages and culture.
3. Conduct regular teacher training on bilingual and culturally responsive pedagogy.
4. Ensure equitable distribution of teachers across tribal and remote areas.
5. Develop ST-centered curricula reflecting cultural practices and local knowledge.
6. Strengthen teacher-parent collaboration through regular meetings.
7. Incorporate co-curricular activities (arts, sports, cultural programs).
8. Provide scholarships, free textbooks, uniforms, and hostels.
9. Encourage teachers to act as mentors addressing academic and emotional needs.
10. Engage NGOs for vocational training and skill development.

Conclusion:

ST students in Tripura face multifaceted educational challenges, including language barriers, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, economic constraints, and cultural isolation. Addressing these requires a holistic approach: culturally relevant curricula, mother-tongue instruction, equitable teacher placement, parental involvement, and socio-economic support. Integrated interventions can enhance literacy, learning outcomes, and social inclusion, empowering tribal communities and contributing to the state's overall development.

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