



# BARRIERS TO HIGHER EDUCATION AMONG SCHEDULED CASTE STUDENTS: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY IN UTTAR DINAJPUR

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**Abstract:** Education is widely regarded as a key weapon for social mobility and empowerment, particularly for marginalized communities. However in India, where AI is establishing its unchallenged dominance within the contemporary global order, members of Scheduled Caste (SC) community continue to face significant barriers in accessing and continuing higher education. The present study explores the issue of educational backwardness among SC students in Kaliyaganj block of Uttar Dinajpur district, West Bengal, specifically within higher education. The study is based on qualitative research using in-depth interviews with 40 respondents who discontinued their education after completing secondary or higher secondary levels. A snowball sampling method was employed to identify respondents. The findings reveal that multiple interrelated factors contribute to educational discontinuation, including socio-cultural norms, gender discrimination, and economic hardship, lack of parental support, peer influence, early marriage, and institutional barriers such as language difficulties and privatization of education. The study highlights that most respondents are first-generation learners who lack educational support at home. Furthermore, structural inequalities and social distance within educational institutions also discourage SC students from pursuing higher education. The paper concludes that despite various government initiatives, educational inequality persists due to deep-rooted social and economic factors. It suggests the need for comprehensive policy interventions, awareness programs in rural areas, and institutional reforms to enhance access and retention of SC students in higher education.

**Keywords-** Educational Backwardness, Higher Education, Dropout, Social Inequality, First-Generation Learners, Gender Disparity

## 1. Introduction

India is characterized by vast social diversity structured along caste, class, and gender lines. Among these, the Scheduled Castes (SCs) have historically been subjected to social exclusion, discrimination, and economic deprivation. Traditionally regarded as “untouchable” in the Hindu social order, these communities have long occupied a lower social status, which has significantly limited their access to resources and opportunities. Although constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies have been implemented to uplift these communities, disparities in education remain a significant concern. Education plays a crucial role in enabling individuals to improve their socio-economic status and participate meaningfully in society. It is often considered one of the most effective tools for social transformation and empowerment. However, in reality, access to education, especially higher education, remains unevenly distributed. For many SC students, particularly in rural and marginalized regions, education has not been able to fully function as a transformative force due to structural and functional limitations. Factors such as illiteracy among parents, poverty, lack of awareness, and absence of proper guidance continue to hinder their educational progress.

The present study focuses on Kaliyaganj block in Uttar Dinajpur district of West Bengal, a rural and economically underdeveloped area located near the Indo-Bangladesh border. A large proportion of the population in this region belongs to Scheduled Castes. Most of these students are first-generation learners, coming from families with little or no educational background. As a result, even though they enroll in schools, they often do not receive a supportive learning environment at home. Additionally, families are often unable to provide the necessary academic guidance or encouragement needed to sustain education

beyond the basic level. Despite the availability of various government schemes, reservation policies, and welfare programmes aimed at improving educational access, basically in this region a significant section of SC students remains unaware of these opportunities. Moreover, socio-cultural and economic conditions in the region further restrict their ability to pursue higher education. Many students discontinue their studies after completing secondary or higher secondary education due to multiple constraints. This study, therefore, seeks to understand the underlying causes of educational backwardness among SC students in Kaliyaganj, with particular emphasis on the factors leading to their discontinuation from higher education. By focusing on their lived experiences, the study aims to provide a deeper insight into the structural challenges and social realities that shape their educational trajectories.

## 2. Literature Review

Behera (2015) analyzed the status of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in higher education in India and found that, despite constitutional provisions and affirmative action policies, SC students remain underrepresented compared to other social groups. The study highlights that enrolment rates of SC students have improved over time, a significant gap still exists due to economic constraints, social discrimination, and lack of access to quality educational resources. Furthermore, factors such as parental attitudes, rural location, and the need for immediate income contribute to unequal educational capabilities.

Das and Halder (2018) investigated the causes of educational backwardness among Scheduled Caste women students in West Bengal and identified multiple interrelated socio-economic and institutional factors. The study found that family environment plays a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes, while inadequate institutional facilities, poor institutional climate, and limited government support significantly contribute to educational disadvantages. It further highlighted that poverty, lack of awareness about the importance of education, language barriers, insufficient infrastructure, shortage of qualified teachers, and prevailing cultural norms often lead to low participation and higher dropout rates among SC women students.

Ranjini Ghosh (2019), in her study "Identifying Inconsistency of Minority in Higher Education as Barrier towards Inclusive Society in West Bengal," finds that Scheduled Caste students continue to face significant barriers in higher education despite the presence of reservation policies and welfare schemes. The study reveals that rural students are more disadvantaged compared to their urban counterparts in accessing educational benefits. Furthermore, the study points out institutional and social challenges, including inadequate awareness about scholarships, poor implementation of policies, and experiences of caste-based discrimination, which create feelings of inferiority and discourage academic participation. Gender bias is also identified as a major issue, with female students being more vulnerable to dropout due to early marriage and social pressures.

Sasi, Francis, and Sabu (2020) examined the attitudes of Scheduled Caste (SC) students towards higher education and found that their educational preferences and participation are shaped by multiple socio-economic and institutional factors. The study reveals that most SC students tend to prefer non-technical courses due to their easy availability and lower cost, while technical education is less pursued. It also highlights that major barriers to higher education include high expenses, lack of accessibility to institutions, time constraints, poor family background, and inadequate teaching facilities.

Kumar (2021) examined the challenges faced by Scheduled Caste (SC) students in accessing higher education in Jammu and Kashmir and found that multiple interrelated barriers limit their participation. These include social factors such as gender discrimination and early marriage, economic constraints like poverty and lack of family support, personal issues such as low academic motivation, and educational limitations including inadequate infrastructure and lack of institutional facilities. The study also highlights that many students drop out after secondary education due to these combined pressures. However, some enabling factors, such as supportive families, positive teacher attitudes, peer encouragement, and access to scholarships that help certain students overcome these challenges.

Senthamizhselvan and Dineshkumar (2024), in their study "Exploring Higher Educational Barriers for SC Students in Thiruvallur District, Tamil Nadu," find that Scheduled Caste students face multiple barriers in accessing higher education, mainly due to socio-economic constraints such as poverty, unemployment, and low family income. The study shows that many students are compelled to engage in part-time or full-time work to support their families, which adversely affects their academic performance and continuation in education. It also highlights that large family size, lack of financial resources, and limited parental support reduce the likelihood of pursuing higher education.

### 3. Objectives of the Study

- To analyses the role of family and peers in shaping educational decisions.
- To explore gender-based disparities in educational attainment.
- To investigate institutional barriers such as language and privatization.

### 4. Area of the Study

The present study is conducted in Kaliyaganj block of Uttar Dinajpur district in West Bengal. This region is located in the northern part of the state, close to the Indo-Bangladesh border, and is predominantly rural in nature. Uttar Dinajpur is considered one of the relatively backward districts of West Bengal in terms of socio-economic development. According to the Census of 2011, Scheduled Castes constitute approximately 61.77% of the total population in the study area, making it a socially significant region for examining caste-based educational disparities. A large section of the population is engaged in agriculture and daily wage labour, and the area is characterized by limited access to higher educational institutions, poor infrastructure, low levels of awareness, and widespread poverty. Most students in this region are first-generation learners and lack a supportive educational environment at home.



**Map of Uttar Dinajpur District Showing Kaliyaganj Block**  
 Source: <https://share.google/images/GOnYVBu30RBSrIeYE>

### 5. Methodology of the study

The present study adopts a qualitative research approach with an exploratory design to understand the lived experiences of Scheduled Caste (SC) students regarding their discontinuation from higher education. The research was conducted in Kaliyaganj block of Uttar Dinajpur district, West Bengal, a predominantly rural and socio-economically backward region. A total of 40 respondents were selected, consisting of SC students who had discontinued their education after completing class 10 or 12. The snowball sampling technique was employed to identify participants, wherein initial respondents helped locate others with similar backgrounds. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews, which enabled a comprehensive understanding of the respondents' personal experiences, perceptions, and challenges.

### 6. Findings and Discussions

The findings of the study are discussed in relation to the stated objectives, focusing on the role of family and peers, gender disparities, and institutional barriers affecting the educational trajectories of Scheduled Caste (SC) students in Kaliyaganj.

#### • Role of Family and Peers in Shaping Educational Decisions

The study reveals that family plays a decisive role in determining whether students continue their education beyond the secondary level. Most respondents belong to economically disadvantaged and educationally backward families, where parents are largely illiterate and unaware of the long-term benefits of higher education. As a result, students often do not receive the necessary academic guidance or encouragement at home. Most of the respondents reported that, parents prioritize immediate economic contribution over

education and encourage their children to engage in traditional occupations or wage labour. Peer influence also emerges as a significant factor, particularly among male students. According to the findings, many boys discontinue their studies after completing Madhyamik (secondary level) and migrate to metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad in search of work. This decision is often influenced by friends who had previously dropped out of school and migrated for employment, earning income and improving their family's economic condition, such as constructing houses, furthermore buying expensive Mobile Phones, Motor-cycle, Smart watch, clothes etc. Observing such outcomes, other students develop similar aspirations. Furthermore, this trend is reinforced by family members and neighbours, who encourage or even pressure students to migrate for work rather than pursue higher education. Economic necessity combined with social validation of migration as a successful pathway leads to early dropout. This situation clearly reflects how economic pressure and peer group influence jointly shape the educational aspirations and decisions of rural SC youth, resulting in discontinuation from formal education at an early stage.

### • **Gender-Based Disparities in Educational Attainment**

The findings of the study clearly indicate the presence of strong gender-based inequalities in educational attainment. Female students face greater barriers compared to their male counterparts. All female respondents reported that their families do not support girls' education beyond a certain level, as it is perceived that investing in girls' education does not yield economic returns for the family after marriage. Early marriage is identified as a major factor contributing to the discontinuation of girls' education. Social pressure from family and community often compels parents to arrange marriages for their daughters at a young age, thereby limiting their educational opportunities. Additionally, concerns regarding safety and mobility restrict girls from traveling long distances to access higher education institutions. Furthermore, the influence of peers also affects female students. When other girls in the community drop out, it creates a collective pattern that discourages continued education. Thus, gender norms and socio-cultural expectations significantly hinder female participation in higher education.

### • **Institutional Barriers: Language and Privatization**

Institutional factors also play a crucial role in limiting access to higher education for SC students. One of the major barriers identified is the increasing privatization of education, which has led to a rise in educational costs. Many respondents reported that they are unable to afford the expenses associated with private institutions, including admission fees, tuition fees, accommodation, and study materials. Government scholarships, though available, are often insufficient to meet these costs. Language also emerges as a significant barrier. Most respondents have studied in Bengali medium schools, but higher education and entrance examinations are often conducted in English. This creates a disadvantage for SC students, who struggle to compete with students from English-medium backgrounds. As a result, even capable students face difficulties in accessing higher education.

Additionally, the study highlights the presence of social distance and lack of supportive interaction within educational institutions. SC students often feel marginalized due to differences in caste and academic preparedness. This lack of inclusion reduces their motivation and contributes to dropout.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study highlights that educational backwardness among Scheduled Caste students in Kaliyaganj is deeply rooted in a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. The findings demonstrate that family expectations, peer influence, and gender norms significantly shape students' educational decisions, often leading to early discontinuation after secondary or higher secondary levels. Female students are particularly disadvantaged due to gender discrimination and early marriage, while economic hardship and lack of parental awareness further restrict opportunities for both boys and girls. Additionally, institutional barriers such as the rising cost of education due to privatization and language-related challenges create further obstacles in accessing higher education. Despite the presence of government policies and support schemes, their impact remains limited due to lack of awareness and structural inequalities. Therefore, a comprehensive and inclusive approach addressing these multiple dimensions is essential to improve educational access and retention among SC students and to ensure their meaningful participation in higher education.

## 8. Suggestions

- Awareness programmes should be conducted to highlight the importance of higher education among SC communities.
- Parental attitudes towards education should be improved through counseling and community engagement.
- Career guidance should be provided to reduce peer-driven migration and early workforce entry.
- Measures should be taken to promote gender equality and prevent early marriage among girls.
- Higher education institutions and vocational centres should be established in rural areas.
- Language support programmes should be introduced to help students cope with English-medium education.
- Government should regulate the rising cost of privatized education.
- Teachers should be sensitized to create an inclusive and supportive educational environment.
- Proper implementation and monitoring of government schemes should be ensured.

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