

# Exploring Gender Dynamics and challenges in the Educational Participation among Tribal Community of West Bengal

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## Abstract:

Education is one of the important factors that leads to the development of the society. Education will immediately lead to nation-building if every member of society has access to it. Education is crucial for a society's socioeconomic progress. A person's level of education and career are important factors in determining how they will live their lives. After the discovery of the importance of education for all, Inclusive education has been introduced to educate the students with diverse need, culture and language under one roof as a result of which students may learn national and international integration and equality will be maintained in the society. National Education Policy 2020 also describes about need of the upliftment of the backward classes (ST, SC, OBC, Women, third gender etc.) who are deprived from their educational right. An effort has been made through this paper to highlight challenges and issues pertaining in the path of education of the Tribal Women in West Bengal. The study is based on secondary data like review of previous researches, books, and researcher has also used the data from Tribal Development Department and Ministry of Tribal Affairs to find out the educational schemes for spreading education among the Scheduled Tribe people, especially women in the state. 2001 and 2011 census data have been used to identify the disparity in the literacy status of tribal men and women.

**Keywords:** gender dynamics, tribal populations, empowerment, education

## Introduction:

India is celebrating 79<sup>th</sup> years of its independence today and has experienced substantial growth, yet our country confronts persistent obstacles in fostering equality and advancing holistic development. Tribal, commonly referred as Adivasis meaning "original inhabitants" are historically been considered as the most backward community and educationally, socially and geographically isolated (Khanda,2018). Although the improvement has been seen in National literacy rate, educational disadvantage within the tribal population is rigid and lags significantly behind. According to the Census of India (2011) we can find approximately 8.6% of tribal population spread over various geographical locations in India, with over 700 tribes recognized nationwide (Census of India, 2011). They speak multiple languages, follows diverse cultures and varieties of religion. The process of Sanskritization, modernization and

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other dislocation procedure have created a marginalized class in society (Khanda 2018; Mondal et al.,2023).

Prior independence, the British rulers has used laws such as Land Acquisition Act of 1894 and the Forest Act of 1927 to deprive tribals to their rights to land and community to forest products due to growing clamor for wood and other material and minerals from forests as a result of industrialization within their own country. (Mondal, Khatun & Mete 2023). Contemporary researches have shown that these historical disadvantages intersect with current socio-economic challenges such as poverty, early marriage, limited access to quality schooling, language barriers and cultural expectations, further narrowing the educational access for tribal women (Sharma. S, 2022; Damor PR, Damor JR & Damor VR ,2024).

Article 366 (25) of Indian constitution characterize Scheduled tribe as specific communities identifies for constitutional; safeguards. unique provisions have been provided in articles 46, 275, 330,332,335,338,340 etc. in order to protect the interest of tribals and to guard them against social injustice and exploration (Oraw &toppo, 2012, cited in Khanda 2018). Various researches have proved that the most vulnerable are those who are from tribes, particularly tribal women in our country and this can be solved by the quality education. So, equal opportunity and education is the most pivotal factors required for their development. Education is very important for mental development and building a peaceful society with national and international integration. It is highly affected by the work participation and occupation pattern of the society. Education is the back bone of the society without education human resources cannot be developed. This applies to tribal people too. So, for the development of the country as a whole this backward community also needs to be uplifted. Though the Indian government had passed many laws for the equality and recently in NEP 2020 this minority groups and their right subjected to a goal and placed into sustainable development but these backward classes are still lacking behind. (National Education Policy, 2020; Damor PR, Damor JR & Damor VR ,2024).

**Tribals in West Bengal:** As per the 2011 census we can find 52,96,963 population of tribals in West Bengal which is about 5.8% of the population of the state, with approximately 5.3 million tribals residing across districts like Darjeeling, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Purulia, Bankura and Dakshin Dinajpur (Census of India, 2011). West Bengal is the home of Approximately 40 distinct Tribal communities. Despite various policies and programs of the state and central governments, tribal women in West Bengal have low literacy and educational attainment as compared to tribal men and non-tribal women (Biswas,2022; Mandal,2023).

Multiple researches have highlighted that tribal women of West Bengal are still lacking behind, there may be gap in recommendation and implementation of steps in the said policies in the context of education although persistent efforts have been made to increase the school enrollment and retention (Ministry of Tribal Affairs,2021; Damoor PR, Damor JR, & Damor VR, 2024). Gender disparity has also been noticed in the literacy rate and educational achievement compounded by household labor expectations, socio-economic condition and inadequate infrastructure in tribal area. (Maji,2016; Khanda,2018; Sen & Roy,2021).

In light of this, present paper reviews existing literature to analyze the educational status of tribal women in West Bengal and explores the gender disparities and obstacles they face in pursuing education. It also critically examines the government efforts for bridging this gap because it is very essential to understand their current educational position for planning interventions which can promote empowerment and equitable development.

### Objectives:

1. To examine the position of tribal women in context of their education in West Bengal
2. To identify the obstacles that tribal women in West Bengal face while they pursue education.
3. To draw out the steps taken by the government for empowering tribal women and bridging the gender gap in context of education in West Bengal critically.

**Method and procedure:** It is a review-based paper and the analytical method is used to explain the data.

**Data Sources:** Research Articles, theses, Census of India data of 2001 and 2011 and government publications on schemes and programs for tribal education.

### Results and discussion:

#### 1. Tribal women's educational status in West Bengal:

The analysis of census data and previous research shows that tribal women in West Bengal have historically experienced low literacy rates and significant gender disparities in education (Maji, 2016; Khanda, 2018; Dey & Maiti, 2024). During 2001 census rate of literacy of the population in West Bengal's tribes was 43.4%. Among which 57.38% is of it is male and only 29.15% is of female and during 2011 census tribal people's overall literacy rate in West Bengal is 57.92. where 68.16% of male are literate and 47.71% of female are literate. These data clearly show the disparity between the male and female rate of literacy of the tribals in West Bengal though the rate of literacy of tribal women has been increased in 2011 census in comparison to 2001 census (Maji, 2016; Khanda, 2018; Das, 2019).

**Table: 1.1, Comparative analysis of Schedule Tribe literacy rate in West Bengal as per census**

| Census | Total percentage of literacy rate of S.T population | Percentage of Male S.T Literacy rate | Percentage of female S.T literacy rate | Gap in percentage of S.T male female literacy rate |
|--------|---|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| 2001   | 43.4  | 57.38                                | 29.15                                  | 28.23  |
| 2011   | 57.92   | 68.16                                | 47.71                                  | 20.45  |

Source: census of West Bengal 2001&2011

Table above has clearly indicated that as per 2001 census there was 28.23% of disparities and in 2011 census 20.45% of disparities between the rate of literacy of male and female population

of S.T in West Bengal. Figure given below has more clearly shown the differences in literacy rate of both men and women S.T. population of West Bengal.

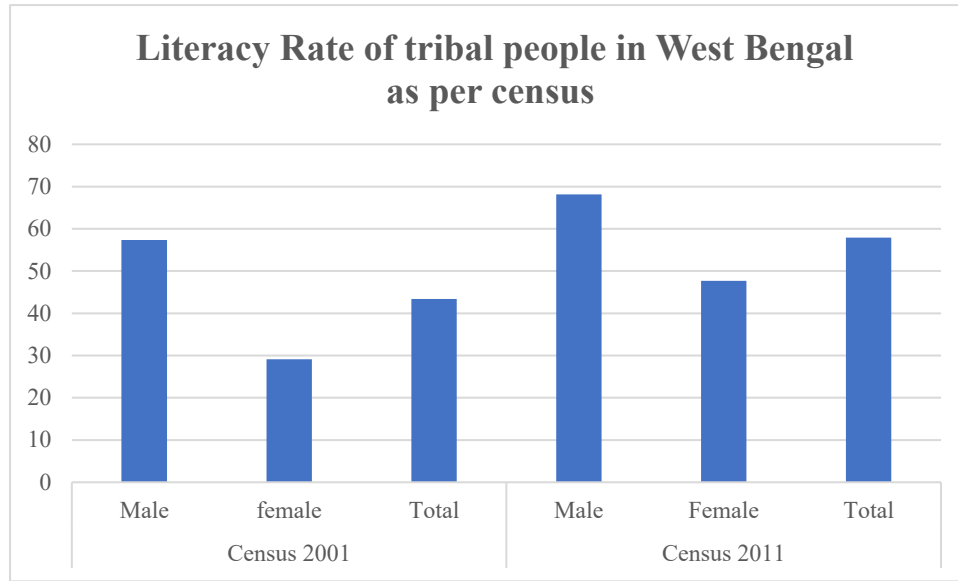


Figure 1.1: graphical representation of literacy rate of population (Male and Female)

The figure above depicts that the gender disparity is an alarming concern in tribal education. Contemporary researches confirm that the situation in West Bengal is still in a struggling phase, with persistent gaps in enrollment and retention (Dey & Maiti, 2024; Pradhan, 2023). These findings show that tribal education in West Bengal is still characterized by limited access.

## 2. Challenges pertaining on the path of tribal women towards education in West Bengal:

Women's participation in higher education remains limited (Bhunia, 2023). There are various researches which throw light on the challenges of tribal women for pursuing education. Low literacy level is the result of significant barriers faced by tribal women in accessing formal education (Maji, 2016 & Khanda, 2018). Regional disparity is also found in districts like Purulia where educational facilities are inadequate (Daripa, 2017). It has been observed that tribal students lag behind in academic performance due to disadvantages in socio-economic background and socio-cultural factors (Basu & Chatterjee, 2014; Pal & Mondal, 2022; Mandal, 2023). Unequal distribution of educational opportunities is the result of gender discrimination within the households (Kapur, 2021). Following are the factors responsible for educational backwardness of tribal women in West Bengal:

**Economic Constraints:** Poverty or low social and economic status of the tribal individual are causing the gender disparity in the status of literacy among tribal members and this is one of the important reasons for drop out of the tribal girls. Children particularly girls from families with limited financial resources are withdrawn from the institutions to contribute to the domestic responsibilities and household income because they often give priority to immediate economic survival over long-term investments in education (Basu & Chatterjee, 2014; Sen & Roy, 2021). Recent researches reassert that economic deprivation still continues to be the significant cause for the dropout among tribal girls (Pradhan, 2023; Jabbar et al., 2024). Timing of the school is also creating a hurdle on the way towards education for tribal girls having low socio-economic

background in West Bengal because most of the tribals residing here depends on the agriculture and they go for the work early in the morning giving the responsibilities of house hold work and care work of their siblings which causes the irregular attendance and dropout of the tribal girls.

**Socio-Cultural Practices:** Socio-Cultural factors such as early marriage, dowry practices, and gender discrimination consequentially hamper the girl's education. Parents often neglect the education of girls and compromise it with the amount to be paid as dowry during their marriage. Such practices lead to the high dropout rates of girls at their early age. Even the recent studies also confirms that traditional norms continuously restrict the educational opportunities for tribal girls (Mal &Khatun, 2022; Padmavathi &Rama Devi, 2024)

**Inadequate Awareness:** Lack of awareness of parents about the importance of education and government schemes and policies related education especially for girls is also one of the important causes for backwardness. Many of tribal families are not aware of the scholarships and welfare programs designed for supporting education. So, increasing awareness is very essential for improving enrollment and retention rates (Maji, 2016; Karo &Dash,2025).

**Geographical Isolation:** Lack of adequate schools and transportation facilities in tribal dominated areas is one of the main causes for the backwardness of the tribal individual in context of education. Many of the tribal girls drop out because they feel insecure to travel long distance for their education (Chakraborty, 2019; Dey &Maiti, 2024). Location of their settlement is also creating issue in the way of education in tribal education because many of the teachers are reluctant to work in the remote areas (Sharma. S, 2022)

**Infrastructure deficit:** Lack of proper infrastructural facilities in school like separate toilets, electricity, drinking water, suitable class room also causes challenges in the way of tribal girl education. Poor infrastructure mostly affects adolescent girls, leading to low attendance and dropout. So, it is very necessary to improve school infrastructure because it is crucial for bridging the gender gap (Pal& Mondal, 2022; Jabbar et al. 2024).

**Parental Attitude and Gender Norms:** Many of the parents in tribal communities hesitate to send their daughter in co-education institution due to safety concern and social norms are also one of the reasons for backwardness of female education. Such attitudes contribute to the gender disparity in education (Daripa,2017; Sharma. S, 2022).

**Communication and Language barrier:** Communication and language are another challenge in the path of the education of tribal girls. Tribal speaks verities of their own language and it becomes difficult to adopt other language than their mother tongue for the acquisition of education and most of the teachers also lacks the knowledge of tribal language which creates communication gap between the teacher and students leading students towards withdrawal from education (Karo &Dash,2025).

**Institutional and Administrative issues:** Weak implementation, Political apathy and lack of cooperation between the various departments working for the tribal education is also another important reason for the low literacy rate of tribal women (Sharma S, 2022; Minz& Tyag,2023). Contemporary researches also highlight the need for better accountability and governance (Jabbar et al., 2024).

**Low aspiration and early marriage:** Another important reason behind the backwardness of tribal women is their low aspiration, less self-motivation and early marriage. They are satisfied with their status and does not look forward for any change. Many girls do not pursue higher education due to lack of awareness and encouragement (Sen & Roy, 2021; Mal & Khatun, 2022).

### **3. Steps taken by the government for bridging the gender gap and educating the tribal women in West Bengal:**

Education is a most powerful instrument for ameliorating the socio-economic status of tribal women and empowering them. It promotes gender equality by increasing employment opportunity and enhancing their decision-making capacity. It plays a vital role in breaking the cycle of poverty and marginalization (Karo & Dash, 2025). Contemporary researches have depicted that enhancing accessibility to education can remarkably contribute to the women empowerment and their overall development (Padmavathi & Rama Devi, 2024; Nayak & Paul, 2024). So, promoting education is very essential for achieving inclusive and sustainable development. After reviewing various researches, it has been found that government has passed various policies and schemes for the upliftment of the tribal girls but only few literatures provide critical evaluation of their effectiveness. Recent researches have suggested that despite the efforts of policy, gaps in awareness, implementation and accessibility still exist (Jabbar et al., 2024).

#### **Government Programme and Policies for the education of Tribal women in West Bengal**

**Schemes of Central Government for the STs:** Central government has passed many schemes for the upliftment of tribal people. Especially for the girls. Some of them are discussed below:

**Feeder School:** These are the English medium primary school for tribal boys and girls from class I-V known for feeding the Eklavya Model Residential school because student after passing feeder school can join Eklavya school by rule.

**Eklavya Model Residential School (EMRS):** These schools are established to provide quality education for ST students in remote areas from class VI-XII. This school also provides free fooding and lodging for the students. Computer education and scholarships are also given to students (Ministry of tribal affairs, government of India, 2021). Though EMRS has expanded access to education, studies find out that there are limits awareness about the scheme among tribal families, and the girls from remote areas are still facing challenges in the continuation of education due to their socio-cultural constraints (Biswas, 2022; Mandal, 2023).

#### **Scholarship Programs (Pre- and Post- Metric, National Overseas Scholarship Scheme):**

Through Pre-Metric scholarship scheme central government gives grants for ST kids whose parents works as flayers, tanners, scavengers, or engage in similar profession. The day scholar students will be getting grants of Rs. 110 per month. for up to 10 months and of Rs. 750 per annum is provided as Adhoc Grant. The Hostellers will be given the grant of RS. 700 per month for up to 10 months and Adhoc Grant of RS.100 per annum. from class III to X. Under Post- Metric Scholarship scheme students belonging to ST community whose parents' income is less than Rs. 2,00,000/- P.A. are given grant of Rs. 750/- per month for their studies. Through NOS scheme financial support are given to S.T students for higher education (masters, Doctoral and Post doctoral level). Although the enrollment rate of tribal students has been improved through these

schemes, research indicates that girls are not able to be equally benefited with that of boys because of additional household work burdens and restricted mobility (Sen & Roy, 2020; Mandal, 2023).

**Vocational education in Tribal areas:** Vocational training is given to tribals according to their level of education. Through this scheme skills of tribal youths are developed according to the need of the society so that they may also become self-employed and 33% of seats are reserved for tribal girls in the course.

**Mid-Day-Meal:** This Programme has been introduced to increase the enrollment and retention of pupils from underprivileged classes in school by offering free meals during the school hour. It has been found that attendance of tribal children including girls at primary level has been increased (Government of India, 2018). Though it has effectively influenced in the primary level, there is less evidence about that the Programme has reduced the dropout at the secondary level (Biswas,2022).

#### **Government of West Bengal's initiatives:**

Alongside Central schemes, Government of West Bengal has initiated several states- specific programs targeting the educational disparities focusing on the local socio-cultural realities.

#### **Education and maintenance Grants:**

State government provides book grants for ST pupils, through this Programme financial assistance is offered for fifth to tenth grade tribal students in government and government-aided school. Along with this maintenance grants and hostel grants are also provided to ST students. Although these initiatives are taken to reduce the direct costs of schooling, they have low success because girls are restricted by socio-cultural and household labor (Daripa, 2017).

**Ashram Hostel:** Ashram hostels are established by BCW Department of West Bengal within the premises of recognized schools. These hostels offer accommodation, meals, and academic support with the special provisions for a tribal girl. These facilities have improved access but the issues remain with shortage of teachers, quality of education and safety concerns discourages the female students (Biswas, 2022).

**Merit based financial aid Programme for students in class xi- xii and five to ten:** Based on their merit's scholarships are provided to students in secondary and senior secondary levels with the intention for academic excellence among disadvantaged students. But often, it disproportionately benefits the students who have already overcome the early educational barriers shedding those who wavered due to socio-economic constraints. Thus, they are not able to fully address the structural inequalities (Mandal, 2023).

**Pandit Raghunath Murmu Residential Schools:** These schools have been established by the BCW Dept of a west Bengal in Bankura, Purulia, Burdwan, West Medinipur, East Medinipur and Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal for reforming the culture and discovering "Olchiki" Santhali language's script. This are government sponsored school providing the education from class v-xii in Bangali medium. Though this program represents the progressive step yet researches suggests that teachers' limited knowledge and capacity on tribal languages and culturally responsive pedagogy has reduced its impact (Sen & Roy, 2020; Mandal,2023).

**Belpahari Residential Girl's Schools for ST:** Residential school for Higher secondary girls' students have been established at Belpahari in Jhargram one of the subdivisions of Midnapore district of West Bengal and students are offered boarding, lodging, garments, medical treatment and educational supporting materials by the government.

**Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Medha Puraskar:** This Puraskar will be awarded to selected 500 ST student according to the result of Madhya Pariksha organized by West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. Cash prize of Rs. 5000/- and certificate of merit is awarded to the excellent pupil.

Along with all of the above initiatives Joint Entrance Coaching is also provided for ST students who are aiming to appear for the joint entrance examination for admission to medical and engineering courses in future. The entire coaching fee of the selected students are paid by the government and some amount of stipend will also be given to the students during the coaching period. Apart from this, scheme like Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, Kanya Shree Prakalpa, Siksha Shree Scholarship scheme, Adivasi Siksha Rinn Yojana (ASRY) also plays a vital role in educating tribal people especially tribal girls in West Bengal.

### **Conclusion:**

Present study will be very helpful for the upliftment of women education with specifically referencing the tribal women in West Bengal. The findings shows that more awareness and facilities should be given to the tribal communities especially women for their growth in education. Although ray of hope has been noticed with the increased percentage of literacy rate of tribal women in 2011 census. More researches should be carried out for the finding out the reasons behind the backwardness of the tribal female of West Bengal with particular reference to education and policies must be adopted with multi-dimensional strategies, combining the awareness campaigns, community engagement and culturally sensitive teaching methods which can ensure the sustainable empowerment of tribal women through education.

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