

HIGHER EDUCATION IN TRIBES OF INDIA: EMERGING ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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This paper attempts to examine and understand the low literacy level and education among tribes of India. The paper discusses the role of government, institutions, programmes, and linkages between education and development. Various programmes and schemes have been initiated but very few of them have benefited them. Many of the programmes did not benefit the tribal community because the programmes were not contextualized and localized considering regional, geographical, and physical differences and barriers. Other reasons for not reaching the benefits of the programs to the tribals are lack of political will, corruption, lack of proper implementation and lesser attention on development in tribal areas. The paper highlights the need for special focus on higher education in tribals, which is essential for overall development.

Introduction

The 93rd constitutional amendment made education a fundamental right. The national policy on education, 1986, modified in 1992 envisaged free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14 years before the onset of 21st century. To this end a number of policies and programmes have been launched. It is widely realised that the society with higher percentage of literates has higher levels of development. Primary education takes a lead in economic development, as the return to primary education is the highest followed by secondary and higher education. In India the social rate of return is 29.3% in primary education compared to 10.8 % in university education (Tilak 1994). However, the efficiency and equity effects of education depend upon the level of both quantitative and qualitative expansion of schooling. Since elementary education has the highest impact on generation and distribution of income, there is a greater need for expansion of elementary education particularly in a less developed region and among backward population.

Education is one of the primary agents of transformation towards development. It is an activity, or a series of activities, or a process which may either improve the immediate living conditions or increase the potential for future living. It may play an important role in bringing tangible benefits by developing the skills of the people. It may expand livelihood opportunities and increase earning potential and thus help in tackling the problem of poverty at large (Sharma 1978). The major role that education has been able to play is with regarding to knowledge inculcation and skill-improvement of the persons. Amartya Sen's argument for faster

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development of India has been to repeatedly stress the criticality of Primary Education, if it purports to serve and is to be assessed regularly by the people themselves is by educating the people.

The vulnerability of tribal populations to exploitation by minor government officials, as well as moneylenders, landlords, and other agents of vested interests, can largely be traced to their illiteracy and general ignorance of the world outside the narrow confines of their traditional environment. Their inability to cope with the many novel forces impinging nowadays on tribal villages and on an economy which had remained virtually unchanged for centuries is by no means due to any innate lack of intelligence. As long as they operate within their familiar atmosphere, tribals evince as much perspicacity, skill, and even true wisdom as any other population, but as soon as they are faced by social attitudes rooted in a different system they become insecure and often behave in a manner detrimental to their own interests. Brought up in a system in which all communications are by word of mouth, and hence used to trusting verbal statements, they get confused by constant reference to documents and written rules, which increasingly determine all aspects of rural life. Unable to read even the receipt given by an official and obliged to put their thumb impressions on documents which they cannot understand, they are easy victims of any fraud or misrepresentation which more educated exploiters are likely to devise.

The disadvantages under which illiterate tribals labour are multiplied in the case of those who do not even speak and understand the language of the dominant population, and hence cannot communicate with officials except through better-educated fellow tribesmen acting as interpreters. Many of the tribal groups of Andhra Pradesh long ago lost their own language and speak Telugu as their mother tongue. In their case there is no language barrier, and hence no need for any special type of schooling and higher education. Other tribes, however, speak languages unintelligible to most outsiders, and it is imperative for them to learn Telugu if they want to communicate with members of the majority community. This is the case of the Gonds and Kolams of Adilabad, of some groups of Koyas of Khammam, and of several of the tribes of Vishakapatnam and Srikakulam.

Among the Gonds there are still many who speak no other language than Gondi, a Dravidian tongue closer to Kanara than to Telugu, and many Kolams speak Kolami and Gondi, but neither Telugu nor any other language understood by officials and members of the advanced ethnic groups. Hence they are handicapped at every step as soon as they move out of the small circle of their fellow tribesmen.

Issues and Challenges of School Education

Education for tribals who normally speak their own tongues is beset with difficulties, because the acquisition of literacy has to be combined with the learning of a language

other than the mother tongue. Yet the average teacher available for tribal education institutes has had no training whatsoever in the technique of imparting to children what is to them a foreign language. The first major educational experiment launched among any tribal community of Andhra Pradesh was the Gond Education Scheme in Adilabad District, initiated by the Nizam's government in 1943. At the time, when there was a determined drive to improve the position of the Gonds, Pardhans, and Kolams, it was realized that no advance could be maintained unless it was accompanied by the emergence of at least a small number of literate tribals. The vast majority of Gond children did not speak or understand any language other than Gondi, but there were no teachers who knew Gondi and could communicate with Gond children. Hence there was no other solution to the problem than to produce Gondi-speaking teachers before any schools for Gond children could be established. There existed at that time a few young Gonds who had privately learned the rudiments of reading and writing Marathi, the language spoken by many of the Hindus of the western part of the district. A small band of such semi-literate Gonds were assembled at Marlavai, a village in the hills of Utnur Taluk, and initially given systematic training in the reading and writing of Marathi and in arithmetic.

One of the causes is undoubtedly the very low standard of teaching and facilities in tribal schools. About 75 per cent of all schools are housed in thatched huts, many of which leak during the rains, a defect making their proper functioning extremely difficult. There are, moreover, no quarters for the teaching staff, and rented accommodation is unavailable in most tribal villages. The lack of basic comforts discourages non-tribal teachers from taking on jobs involving residence in remote villages, and among those posted in such villages there is a high rate of absenteeism. While non-tribal teachers are reluctant to work in tribal villages. The reason is that the Education Department has raised the required standard, so that only persons who have attained intermediate standard are eligible for teaching posts. Tribals who have reached that standard are few; those who have done so can continue their education with the help of scholarships, and if they are successful they have a good chance of obtaining more attractive posts owing to the system of reservation of posts for members of scheduled tribes. Hence, qualified tribals are not very interested in appointments as teachers, and those tribal matriculates who would be glad to take up such posts are not acceptable to the education authorities.

Among the teachers working in tribal schools at present, those of non-tribal origin generally have higher educational qualifications than their tribal colleagues. Nevertheless, their efficiency as teachers is not necessarily higher than that of tribal teachers. Their appointment to schools in a tribal area is usually purely accidental. Few of them have expressed any preference for such a posting, and they are given no orientation or training for work among tribal children. Their difficulties begin with their inability to speak and understand the tribal language that most of the younger children know. Moreover, they are total strangers to tribal

culture and the values of the society within which they have to operate. Those who persevere in tribal schools usually pick up a working knowledge of tribes, but their own cultural background stands in the way of an understanding and appreciation of tribal culture and traditions. As quarters are not provided by government and rented accommodation is usually unobtainable, most non-tribal teachers are separated from their wives and children, with the inevitable result that they take every opportunity of leaving their posts and visiting their families. The majority of these teachers try to obtain posts outside the tribal area as soon as possible.

As a result of the shortage of efficient teachers, as well as of the inadequate facilities in most schools, few tribal boys and girls pass the tenth standard, and the majority of those enrolled drop out long before. The reasons for this wastage are many. At the age of ten to twelve, boys and girls are useful for work on their parents' farms, and many tribals are unwilling to spare their children, particularly if they see that the schools are not well run and the teachers' frequent absences condemn the children on many days to virtual idleness. Perhaps more important is the realization among parents, as well as the older pupils, that school education is of limited usefulness. While those who have passed the tenth standard are eligible for minor jobs in government service, by no means all have obtained such jobs, and there is, moreover, the large category popularly described as "tenth failed." Boys who have read up to the tenth standard but failed to pass the final examination have few chances of employment in government service, and as nearly all commercial activities down to small village shops are in the hands of non-tribals who employ on principle only members of their own caste or community, there are no other openings for such youths. Yet ten or more years at school have given them the ambition to find an occupation other than the ordinary farm work for which they are no better qualified than their illiterate contemporaries.

In a study of tribal education in Adilabad District, E. V. Rathnaiah investigated the attitude of Gonds to school education (Rathnaiah 1977). In the course of this investigation he found that in the opinion of the teachers interviewed 13.7 per cent of parents were positively cooperative, 56.3 per cent were favourable to education but not active, 23.7 per cent were indifferent, 1.3 per cent were unfavourable, and 5 per cent were antagonistic. The reasons given by parents for not sending their children to school were as follows:

Need for help in household work	35.7 per cent
Occupation with herding cattle	30.0 per cent
Children's lack of interest in education	25.3 per cent
Ill health	6.6 per cent
Don't know	2.4 per cent

In the opinion of the teachers questioned, the reasons for the poor enrolment of tribals in schools were:

Lack of interest in education among parents	64.5 per cent
Poverty	31.5 per cent
Lack of interest in education among children	4.0 per cent

Even more important factors impeding the spread of education among tribal children are the distance of many villages from the nearest school and the limited places in ashram schools. There are many villages whose children would have to walk five or six kilometres to attend a school, and there are not enough boarding schools to accommodate more than a fraction of the children from villages without primary schools in vicinity.

For tribal children who are eligible for admission to upper primary and high schools, most of which are situated at some distance from tribal villages, there are hostels in which pupils are provided with free board and lodging, and in some cases also with extra tuition. Without such facilities few tribal children could attend high schools, because for most parents it is economically impossible to maintain a child in a taluk or district headquarters.

Issues and Challenges of Higher Education

Notwithstanding all the material facilities provided by government for tribal students, few progress beyond the fifth form. The following figures relating to 1976 make this clear. Of 5,599 tribal children enrolled in the schools of Adilabad District, 4,555 were boys and 1,044 were girls.

TABLE 1.1: HIGHER EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIPS, 1974–75

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Number of Scholars</i>	<i>Amount of Scholarships</i>
Government College, Adilabad	4	Rs.3,400
Degree College, Nirmal	2	Rs.1,648
Junior College, Sirpur-Kaghaznagar	3	Rs.2,863
Government College, Chennur	1	Rs.364
Government College, Mancherial	14	Rs.10,371
Total	24	Rs.18,647

There is no shortage of scholarships for those eligible for higher education, and this may be seen from Table 1.1 (Pratap 1977).

In the Government Degree College, Adilabad, the enrolment in the first-year intermediate course from 1969–70 to 1975–76 was twenty-five, out of which only six students completed their courses. The high degree of wastage was probably due to the students' inadequate previous education, which did not enable them to compete with non-tribal students in a course demanding not only learning by rote

but also independent judgement. The standard of educational performance by tribals, i.e. Gonds, Pardhans, and Naikpods, is reflected in the qualifications of those who succeeded in obtaining employment in government service up to 1977.

A study of tribal manpower resources in Adilabad District undertaken in 1977 by the Tribal Cultural Research and Training Institute, Hyderabad, has diagnosed some of the factors which impede the recruitment of young tribals to government service and private industry. Both in government enterprises and in industry there are numerous vacancies for posts requiring technical skills, but the numbers of tribal candidates with such qualifications are few (Pratap 1972). There is an Industrial Training Institute in Mancherial, entry into which is open to candidates with a pass in the eight standard. In the year 1973-74 one tribal joined one of the courses but dropped out, and in the years 1971-72, 1972-73, and 1974-75 there were no tribal students. In the year 1975-76 six tribal candidates joined this institute; three in the course for fitter's trade and three for tractor mechanic's trade. In 1976-77 three candidates joined the course in mechanic's trade, and in 1977 altogether six tribal students were enrolled in the institute. This is a very small number considering the fact that the Singareni Collieries Company Limited alone has an annual requirement of three thousand candidates to fill vacancies in all grades and has to import labour from other districts because of the lack of sufficient qualified local persons. In 1977 there were seventeen vacancies for holders of certificates of the Industrial Training Institute on the register of the employment exchange, but there were only two tribal candidates.

The number of educational institutions in 1978, together with the number of pupils within the area covered by the plans for tribal development, is shown in Table 1.2 (Pratap 1977). The boarders accommodated in hostels were also given special coaching. The number of teachers in ashram schools was 1,171, and the number of teachers employed in primary, upper primary and high schools was 1,821. The number of students in receipt of post-matric scholarships was 1,950, 468 tribal students were admitted to reputable private schools and public schools, and 90 students were enrolled in the special residential Kinnarsani school for tribals.

TABLE 1.2: PUPILS COVERED BY TRIBAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN, 1978

<i>Number of Educational Institutions</i>		<i>Pupils Within the Area</i>	
Ashram schools	399	Boarders enrolled	26,746
Hostels	343	Boarders enrolled	24,383
Primary schools	1,740	Students enrolled	37,729
Upper primary schools	115	Students enrolled	4,052
High schools	75	Students enrolled	3,630
Junior colleges	6	Students enrolled	305
Aided schools	375	Students enrolled	24,970

In Hyderabad the funds spent on educational institutions accessible to tribal populations have not yet brought about a fundamental change in the tribals' unfavourable position, largely because the social, political, and economic forces arraigned against them have so far prevented all real progress.

Table 1.3 shows the details of the Schedule Tribe students studying at different levels of education during 2004-05. As per the table - 3 the number of boys is more in all the courses compared to girls. But the number girls pursuing various courses are also very significant. The percentage of ST girls in higher education has been increasing gradually. This is a welcoming change. But still there is a need to extend educational opportunities to tribal women and girls living in rural areas. Moreover to bring them into the mainstream of economic development suitable strategies must be adopted to provide vocational as well as skill training courses to improve the socio-economic status of tribal community particularly women who are once alienated and deprived of these facilities and opportunities.

TABLE 1.3: SCHEDULE TRIBE STUDENTS STUDYING AT DIFFERENT LEVEL OF EDUCATION IN INDIA (2004-05)

<i>Educational Level</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Total</i>
Ph.D.	793	544	1337
M.A.	14271	8808	23079
M.Sc.	3324	2160	5484
M.Com.	2296	1347	3643
B.A./B.A. (Hons)	124645	71533	196178
B. Sc./B.Sc. (Hons)	33142	16620	49762
B.Com./B.Com (Hons)	31353	17018	48371
Others*	38754	27445	66199

Source: Internet Selected Educational Statistics Government of India, Ministry of Human Resources, Statistics Division, 2004-05).

*Others include data of Open and Distance learning institutions in 8 states namely Bihar, Gujarat, M.P., Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, U.P and West Bengal.

The Report of the Working Group on Tribal Development (1980) Suggests: "We feel while the core economic sectors might hold primacy in planning education is the key to tribal development.... Education is an input not only for economic development but also for inner strength of the tribal communities so that they can meet the new challenges on terms of some degree of capacity". But there are some constraints on education in general and literacy in particular. Save (1945) once wrote. "In case of people who hardly get bread twice a day, literacy is a tall talk". Ignorance of the people is yet another constraint on tribal development. Numerous programmes of socio-economic development undertaken in the tribal areas in India were not making much headway mainly because of ignorance and illiteracy of the

tribals. Even to take advantage of the various development schemes a certain degree of education is necessary.

Development through literacy and education in a small community depends on (1) Universal provision of schools (2) Universal retention of pupils till they complete the prescribed course, and universal enrolment of pupils. Further the disparity in educational attainments has roots in structural constraints. Instead of the concept of traditional literacy, the concept of functional literacy would be a valuable educational exercise in the content of tribal development. Not only traditional literacy but also other skills which equip the tribals to face boldly the exogenous factors of modernisation root print in this case. The success in this educational endeavour is basically because functional literacy is a kind of mental training in which the adult becomes accustomed to transferring the knowledge and skills acquired to other fields where they are applicable. It is a valuable educational exercise in citizenship one which helps to nurture positive attitude to the problems, adults have to solve and active spirit of co-operation and responsibility in dealing with their collective problems (UNESCO: 1973).

Conclusion

The Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission set up by the Government of India in 1960 under Article 339 of the Constitution severely criticized the reluctance of state governments to satisfy the tribals' demand for primary education in their own languages. Under Article 350A of the Constitution, every state must endeavour to provide children of minority groups with adequate facilities for instruction in their mother tongue at the primary stage of education, but the commission pointed out that some of the states had taken this matter very casually, and failed to provide textbooks in even the major tribal languages. It does not appear that these admonitions have induced state governments to change their policies, and the prospects for the future of tribal languages are thus far from encouraging. The voluminous publications issued by the office of the commissioner for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and other agencies concerned with tribal welfare contain very little information on the problem of tribal languages, and it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that politicians and officials alike regard their ultimate disappearance as inevitable and even desirable in the interest of the integration of the tribes with the majority communities.

The need for higher education and training is a truism. Education in the modern world is not only a process of learning and becoming wise but also a tool at one's command to survive in this age of competition. However cynical this view may be, it is a fact of life and those who are equipped with education of a formal kind, are the achievers, and those who have not acquired or have been denied this tool, are at a tremendous disadvantage vis-à-vis modern living because it is no longer

possible in this world today for any society to remain untouched by modern civilization.

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