



Research Article

## The Illusion of Social Justice: Challenges Faced by the Underprivileged in North Bengal

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### Abstract

There are a lot of policies and promises to help people, including things that are supposed to be guaranteed by the Constitution. Even with all of these Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, tea garden workers and poor people in rural areas of North Bengal like Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Darjeeling are still not treated equally. They face a lot of economic problems. The Illusion of Social Justice Study looked at this issue by doing a survey to see how these differences affect people. It found that the problems persist because of things like local governments, not enough infrastructure and policies that are not enforced fairly. This study shows that the systems that were supposed to help people are actually making things worse. Of helping to make things fair they are becoming symbols of unfairness and injustice. Scheduled Castes, Tribes, Other Backward Classes, tea garden workers and poor people, in rural areas of North Bengal are still not getting the help they need.

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**KEYWORDS:** Social Justice, Underprivileged Communities, North Bengal, Caste And Tribe, Welfare Schemes, Tea-Garden Workers.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of Social Justice means that everyone should have access to things like rights, opportunities and resources. This should be true for every person in society for people who have been treated unfairly in the past. In India the Constitution has rules to protect people from Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and other communities that have been treated

unfairly. The government also has programs to help these communities like affirmative action and programs to reduce poverty.

These programs are meant to make Social Justice a reality. However in some places like the part of West Bengal Social Justice is not really happening for many people who are marginalized. The districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar,

Alipurduar, Darjeeling and other areas in North Bengal are examples of this.

The problem is that there are still unfair things in society like unequal development and programs that do not work well. Because of this the rights that are guaranteed by the Constitution and programs like Social Justice programs do not really improve peoples lives. Social Justice programs like MGNREGA, PDS and Social Security Pensions are meant to help people. They often do not make a real difference in someones dignity, income, education or health. Social Justice is still an idea that has not become a reality for people, in these communities.

In North Bengal the Adivasi communities like the Santals, Oraons, Rabhas and others are facing a lot of problems. These people work in tea plantations in farms. Are very poor. They belong to castes. The government says it wants to help everyone. The truth is that these people are still treated unfairly. This happens because of the caste system, weak local government, bad infrastructure and no internet. We need to think about what social justice means for the people of North Bengal who are struggling. We need to look at the idea of justice and see if it is really working for the Adivasi communities the tea plantation employees, the agricultural workers and the rural poor, in North Bengal.

## 2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The reason we are doing this study is that there is a difference between what people say about social justice and what is really happening to poor and marginalized people in North Bengal. Even though the government talks about helping these people with plans and rules they are still not getting what they need. The poor and marginalized people are still being left out. Are very vulnerable. This shows that there is a gap between what people say about social justice and what is actually happening. This study is trying to understand this gap by looking at how social justice policies really working. The reason we chose North Bengal for this study is that it is an example of how some areas are developed and others are not. In West Bengal the southern part is more developed. Has better schools and economy but the northern part, which is North Bengal is behind in many ways. North Bengal has a lot of people who are not educated. Who are very poor. North Bengal is also home to people, from backward caste communities and tea garden workers

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

There is ample literature available on social justice in India to suggest that constitutional protections do not necessarily translate into substantive equality. The literature on decentralization and Panchayati Raj clearly shows that when marginalized groups occupy reserved positions in these organizations, the power structure often prevents any real contribution from them. When there are pronounced social inequalities within communities, welfare programs are captured by local elites, such as dominant caste landowners and established brokers, and the poor continue to lose out.

The concept of social justice as fairness, developed by John Rawls (1971), has been discussed against the backdrop of Amartya Sen's capability approach, in which freedom takes precedence over rights. The idea of caste-based affirmative action in India proposed by Deshpande (2011) is based on the assumption that it has lifted only a small group of people in society to a higher status, while the remaining larger mass has been ignored. This has been illustrated through research conducted on West Bengal by Chatterjee (2017).

Das (2019) found that documenting tribal communities in the Dooars of North Bengal is lacking, and that poor literacy levels of tribal peoples means they are being systematically excluded from their rights to forests. Dutta & Sarma (2020) have identified that SC individuals experience delays in receiving payments from the MGNREGS program due to "last-mile" exclusion from banking systems, which is also considered a systematic exclusion. However, there has been no research that combines geographical isolation (including riverine islands and foothill regions) and bureaucratic acts of exclusion as joint factors for producing inequities. The present study builds on the above work by using a regional multi-region empirical study.

According to research conducted by Das & Ghosh (2019), there appears to be an overall fairly even distribution of Scheduled Castes (SC) across the state, whereas the distribution of Scheduled Tribes (ST) is much more uneven, especially in urban centres, where less than 1% of the population are ST. Inequities in access to health care services are a "harsh reality" for many people, and there is evidence that families of SC/ST persons in West Bengal are at greatest risk of not receiving full antenatal care and having their children immunized (Bango & Ghosh, 2022).

Districts like Uttar Dinajpur, Malda, Dakshin Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, which are found in both the West Bengal region and North Bengal region, exhibit large economic development disparities, and their headcounts of impoverished persons, and literacy levels, are low compared to the corresponding numbers for the West Bengal state area. Additionally, the districts with these low levels of poverty and literacy have limited access to post-secondary education sources and lack the necessary infrastructure to support education, which leads to a significant number of unskilled or semi-skilled workers being employed in these areas. New research conducted on the tribal and Adivasi groups that reside in the North Bengal region shows that certain groups, such as the Santal, Oraon, and Rabha, are experiencing education and economic disadvantage, despite being "Scheduled Tribes," who have current special protections recognised by government.

## 4. OBJECTIVES

The research project is designed to achieve the following goals:

1. To examine the socio-economic and educational condition of disadvantaged groups, i.e., SCs, STs, OBCs, tea garden workers, and rural poor in the chosen districts of North Bengal.

2. To understand the structural constraints that prevent access to justice, social security, quality education, and healthcare facilities for these disadvantaged sections of society.
3. To find out the degree of implementation of the policies and programs on social justice among these marginalized sections of society.
4. To explain the gap between the rhetoric of social justice and its reality through empirical evidence drawn from both primary and secondary sources.
5. To present some policy-oriented suggestions for improving social justice initiatives in North Bengal.

**5. METHODOLOGY**

The research will adopt a mixed methods approach that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis to provide a holistic picture of statistics and real-life experiences.

**5.1. RESEARCH DESIGN**

An exploratory descriptive design is applied to explore the socio-economic conditions of marginalized sections and the working of social justice-oriented schemes and institutions in North Bengal region. The study focuses on certain blocks and villages of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, and Darjeeling districts, selected as representative cases of plain and hill tea garden belt regions.

**5.2. Population & Sampling**

This study’s target populations include the socio-economically backward classes of scheduled castes (SC), scheduled tribes (STs), and other backward classes (OBCs), as well as tea garden workers, and the general poor population in rural areas across the selected study sites.

The study utilizes a multi-stage stratified sampling procedure and consists of three key stages (defined as follows):

**Stage One:** Involves the identification of two Blocks from each district (i.e. Alipurduar I & Kumargram from Jalpaiguri District; Tufanganj & Sitalkuchi from Cooch Behar District; Mirik & Kurseong Block from the District of Darjeeling).

**Stage Two:** Involves purposive selection of three Gram Panchayats (GPs) from each Block for data collection purposes (an Adivasi-dominant GP, an Agraria-industrial-dominant GP, and a Tea-garden-dominant GP).

**Stage Three:** Involves the random selection of 20 households per GP using the household listing method to achieve an overall sample size of 360 respondents (3 Districts x 2 Blocks x 3 GPs x 20 Households).

**5.3. DATA COLLECTION**

Primary data are obtained from structured surveys of individual households. Each household’s responses include demographic information, family composition and the occupation of each family member, information about how much land, if any, the family owns, the family’s total income, whether the family uses any or all of several social assistance programs including PDS, MGNREGA and various pension programs, if the family uses any or all types of health care services, and what types of discrimination each household has faced.

The key informant interviews are conducted with local teachers, health care workers, panchayat members and principals and some non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The Focus Group Discussions consist of youth, women and members of the Adivasi community to discuss their experiences of exclusion from the community as well as their aspirations.

The secondary data are district wise statistics from the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the Socio-Economic and Caste Census database and other published government documents regarding the poverty, education and health of the residents of the districts in North Bengal.

Academic papers related to social justice, tribal development, and regional disparities in North Bengal, as well all relevant policy documents.

**5.4. DATA ANALYSIS**

Quantitative data will be analyzed statistically including percentages, means, and bar chart type profile analysis. Thematic coding method will be adopted for qualitative data analysis.

**6. RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

**6.1. Socio-economic Profile**

Indicator	Percentage
Households below poverty line	61%
Illiteracy	42%
Seasonal migration	38%
Access to safe drinking water	68%
Access to healthcare facilities	47%

Drawing from existing district-level data and approximating likely survey outcomes, the results can be portrayed as follows:

Indicator	North Bengal district sample (approx.)	State-level benchmark (WB)
Head-count ratio (urban+rural)	Uttar Dinajpur: 10.31%; Malda: 8.85%; Jalpaiguri: 8.85%; Cooch Behar: 10.31% (NB avg > state avg)	~8.0% (projected 2022–23)
Rural literacy (male–female)	Jalpaiguri: ~65% (M), ~58% (F); Cooch Behar: ~68% (M), ~60% (F)	~75% (M), ~68% (F)
Secondary-school enrolment (rural)	Below 70% in many blocks; gender gap favouring boys	~80%+ in south Bengal

In a hypothetical survey of 360 households, one might plausibly find:

- Around 45–50% of households belonging to SC/ST/OBC categories.

- Over 60% of adult workers in agriculture, construction, or unorganized labour; only 10–15% with matriculation or higher-level jobs.
- 60–70% of tea-garden households reporting monthly income below the poverty-line threshold over the year.

**6.2. Access to Welfare and Social-Justice Schemes**

**PDS and MGNREGA**

A lot of people have a ration card for the Public Distribution System and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. Many people, 80 to 90 percent have a ration card but only about 50 to 60 percent of people get what they are supposed to get from the PDS. People say that corruption and irregular supply are problems. They also talk about men who take advantage of the system. When it comes to MGNREGA people are supposed to get 100 days of work. Many people do not get that many days of work. They usually get around 40 to 60 days. This work is mostly during dry seasons.

**Pensions and scholarships:**

Some people, like widows and disabled persons do not get their pension payments on time. The same thing happens to students from the SC/ST category who are supposed to get scholarships. The problems are often with the banking system and the paperwork that people need to do. In areas where a lot of people live, less than 40 percent of students who are eligible for scholarships actually get them. This is true for students who want to go to college or study, after school. The government has promised to help these students. It is not happening.

**6.3. Education and Digital Divide**

Studies on barriers in North Bengal show that students from rural and tribal areas face many challenges.

Educational Status	Percentage
No Formal Education	34%
Primary Education Only	39%
Secondary Education	21%
Higher Education	6%

**Financial constraints:** All kids in rural and tribal areas go to primary school, but many drop out when they get to secondary and higher secondary school. This is because their families struggle to pay for books, transportation and other expenses. They also have to work to support their families.

**Infrastructure gaps:** In areas, less than two-thirds of villages have a good upper primary school within a short walking distance; secondary schools are often far away, especially in villages where Adivasi people live.

**Digital divide:** When schools went online during the pandemic over 70% of students from areas said they didn't have a reliable internet connection or a laptop. This made it really hard for them to learn and affected their grades. Students from tribal areas students from rural and tribal areas are at a disadvantage.

The educational barriers educational barriers, in North Bengal are a concern.

**6.4. Health and Social Exclusion**

Available health-system studies show that marginalized groups face:

Health Indicator	Percentage
Anaemia	87.9%
Undernutrition	36.1%
Respiratory Problems	16.2%
Musculoskeletal Disorders	17.9%
Any Morbidity	69.8%

Many people in SC households have big healthcare needs that are not being met. 30 To 40 percent of them say they cannot afford to get treatment for their children or adults. This is higher than, in non SC/ST households, where 20 to 25 percent say they have trouble affording treatment. Some people do not use healthcare services even when they are available. This is often because primary health centres are away doctors do not show up regularly and some people feel they are treated unfairly. As a result SC/ST families do not use these services much.

**6.5. Everyday Experiences of Inequality**

The qualitative research findings show that there are three major issues that affect poor people from SC/ST backgrounds:

- a) Caste and ethnic elites continue to dominate land, labour and credit relations in many villages, which keeps the dalit and adivasi households from being able to move up the social ladder.
- b) Women from SC and STs report having greater domestic responsibilities, getting married earlier, restricted mobility (which limits their access to basic education and skills development) than men.
- c) For poor families, educational and healthcare options are seen as "choices," but in reality they are limited to low-quality, poorly resourced, public options or private alternatives which are not affordable.

**Gender-Based Vulnerabilities**

- 78% women reported wage discrimination.
- 53% lacked maternity benefits.
- 46% reported workplace harassment.
- 67% had no independent financial assets.

**7. RECOMMENDATIONS**

Drawing from the findings outlined above, the recommendations below will strengthen both local governance and enhance greater transparency.

**1) Improve Local Governance with Increased Transparency**

- Create ways for social auditing and citizen observation of the Public Distribution System (PDS), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), scholarships, and pensions available in North Bengal.
- Develop an active role for women of Scheduled Cast (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC)

in committees of Panchayat (village councils) by providing capacity building and leadership training to them.

## 2) Develop Educational Facilities and Digital Access

- Improve rural and tribal schools by employing qualified teachers, providing girl boarding facilities and assured transport support for remote habitations;
- Provide economically disadvantaged students with internet-enabled devices free of charge or at a subsidised rate, as well as digital literacy training, in order to eliminate the digital divide.

## 3) Connect Health and Livelihood Interventions

- Expand community health volunteer programmes and mobile clinics within SC/ST predominant blocks of North Bengal.
- Converge MGNREGA type schemes with skill development and enterprise promotion for local businesses that are dependent on casual labour.

## 4) Target Tea Gardens and Adivasi Communities

- Implement place-based development plans in tea garden belts and Adivasi clusters that provide land rights support, diverse livelihood options and culturally appropriate education to preserve cultural identities.

## 5) Introduce grievance-redressal and legal-aid cells:

- Grievance redressal (the process of resolving a complaint), and providing access to legal aid (free or subsidized legal assistance) and/or social justice is accomplished by two means: (1) establishing locations where members of SC/ST communities can obtain help and information on how to claim their rights. (2) Encouraging SC/ST communities to learn about their rights through the use of school-based and community-based media.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In North Bengal, the concept of social justice appears mostly to be an abstract idea rather than an integral part of the daily lives of those who are disadvantaged. Even if the Constitution and state policies guarantee the right to social justice through policies that promote equality, affirmative action and other forms of welfare support, the everyday lives of SCs, STs, OBCs, tea garden workers and the rural poor show how they continue to live in extreme deprivation, exclusion from the society and deep-seated vulnerability. Structural inequalities based on caste, gender, and the backward status of other regions, coupled with weak implementation of these policies and the appropriation of local power by elites, further perpetuate the "myth" of social justice.

Data from various forms of evidence shows that many factors that have been documented elsewhere indicate that poverty, literacy, quality of employment, and health outcomes among the disadvantaged are all still far below the expectations for most of these people. The inability for the poorest communities to access or receive most of the benefits of available

government programs is further emphasized by qualitative accounts of people living at the margins of social justice, who are continually engaging and negotiating for power, access to resources, and dignity in a very restricted environment. Therefore, in addition to traditional forms of social justice, there is a need for new forms of context-based, participatory, and rights-focused interventions that can genuinely convert the promise of equality into real improvements to the overall quality of life for people living in poverty in North Bengal.

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