



Research Paper

## Educational Attainment in Tribal Areas: Barriers and Opportunities in West Bengal

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>Educational attainment among Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities in West Bengal reflects persistent structural inequalities despite sustained public policy interventions. While the expansion of schooling infrastructure and welfare schemes has improved access and enrolment, significant disparities continue in literacy, gender parity, and rural–urban educational outcomes. Using secondary data from the Census of India (2011), NFHS-5 (2019–21), National Sample Survey (NSS) education rounds, and government reports, this study applies a descriptive and comparative analytical framework to examine literacy levels, demographic proportions, attendance patterns, and spatial disparities. The findings reveal a literacy gap of nearly 20 percentage points between tribal and non-tribal populations, alongside a pronounced gender gap within ST communities. Rural concentration, poverty, and linguistic barriers further intensify educational marginality. Although policy initiatives such as residential schools, scholarships, and nutritional support schemes have expanded access, structural and cultural constraints continue to limit educational progression and completion. The study emphasises the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, localised planning, and quality-oriented interventions to ensure equitable educational development among tribal communities in West Bengal.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397</li> <li>▪ Received: 09-05-2024</li> <li>▪ Accepted: 27-06-2024</li> <li>▪ Published: 30-06-2024</li> <li>▪ IJCRM:3(3); 2024: 212-215</li> <li>▪ ©2024, All Rights Reserved</li> <li>▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes</li> <li>▪ Peer Review Process: Yes</li> </ul>
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**KEYWORDS:** Tribal education, Scheduled Tribes, Literacy gap, Gender disparity, Rural inequality.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Education functions as a foundational instrument for social mobility, economic participation, and political inclusion. However, in stratified societies such as India, educational attainment is deeply embedded within historical hierarchies of caste, tribe, class, and region. Scheduled Tribes (STs), constitutionally recognised as historically marginalised communities, continue to experience disproportionate educational deprivation despite decades of affirmative policy interventions.

In West Bengal, Scheduled Tribes constitute 5.8 per cent of the total population (Census 2011), amounting to approximately 5.29 million individuals. Tribal populations are spatially concentrated in districts such as Jhargram, Purulia, Bankura, Paschim Medinipur, Birbhum, and Jalpaiguri—regions characterised by rural predominance, forested landscapes, and infrastructural constraints. While the state has achieved overall literacy growth, aggregate improvements obscure persistent intra-state and inter-group disparities.

This study critically examines the patterns and determinants of educational attainment among tribal communities in West Bengal, situating statistical evidence within broader structural and socio-cultural contexts.

**2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

1. To analyse literacy levels among Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal.
2. To compare tribal and non-tribal literacy rates.
3. To examine gender and rural–urban disparities in tribal education.
4. To identify structural barriers affecting educational attainment.
5. To assess policy interventions and emerging opportunities for inclusive educational development.

**3. Materials and Methods**

The study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design based exclusively on secondary data. Data sources include the Census of India (2011), National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21), National Sample Survey (Education Rounds), Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports, and publications of the Government of West Bengal.

**Key indicators examined include:**

- ST population share
- Overall, male and female literacy rates
- Rural–urban literacy differentials
- School attendance among children aged 6–17 years
- Literacy gap analysis between ST and non-tribal populations

Analytical techniques include percentage distribution, differential analysis, and comparative gap measurement to identify disparities across social, gender, and spatial categories.

**4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**4.1 Demographic Marginality and Literacy Disparity**

Census 2011 data reveal that the literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal stands at 57.9 per cent, significantly lower than the state average of 76.26 per cent and the estimated non-tribal literacy rate of approximately 77.7 per cent. The resulting literacy gap of nearly 20 percentage points underscores entrenched structural inequality.

**Table 1:** Population Distribution and Literacy Rate, West Bengal (2011)

Category	Population	Share (%)	Literacy Rate (%)
Total Population	91,276,115	100	76.26
Scheduled Tribe (ST)	5,296,953	5.8	57.9
Non-Tribal Population	85,979,162	94.2	77.7

Source: Census of India, 2011.

This disparity reflects cumulative disadvantage shaped by historical exclusion, geographical isolation, and limited institutional access. As Tilak (2018) argues, educational inequality in India mirrors broader socio-economic hierarchies. For tribal communities, limited exposure to formal schooling across generations has reproduced cycles of low educational attainment.

NSS data further indicate shorter average years of schooling and higher dropout rates among ST households. Thus, the literacy gap is not merely quantitative but reflects systemic barriers in retention and progression.

**4.2 Gendered Dimensions of Educational Inequality**

Gender disparity within tribal communities is particularly pronounced. Census 2011 records male literacy among STs at 68.2 per cent compared to 47.2 per cent for females, a gap of 21 percentage points.

**Table 2:** Gender Gap in Tribal Literacy (2011)

Category	Literacy Rate (%)
ST Male	68.2
ST Female	47.2
Gender Gap	21.0

Source: Census of India, 2011

Although NFHS-5 data show relatively high attendance rates (82.4 per cent for boys and 78.1 per cent for girls), the substantial literacy gap suggests that enrolment does not automatically translate into sustained educational attainment.

Several interrelated factors explain this divergence:

- Early marriage and domestic responsibilities
- Gendered division of labour
- Limited access to secondary schools in rural areas
- Cultural norms restricting female mobility

While schemes such as scholarships and conditional cash transfers (e.g., Kanyashree in West Bengal) have improved girls’ enrolment, retention and transition to higher grades remain uneven.

### 4.3 Spatial Inequality and Rural Concentration

Spatial location significantly shapes educational outcomes. Rural ST literacy (55.1 per cent) remains considerably lower than urban ST literacy (72.4 per cent), generating a rural–urban gap of 17.3 percentage points.

**Table 3:** Rural–Urban Tribal Literacy

Residence	Literacy Rate (%)
Rural ST	55.1
Urban ST	72.4

Source: Census of India, 2011

Tribal populations are predominantly rural and concentrated in districts characterised by:

- Limited secondary and higher secondary institutions
- Inadequate transport connectivity
- Teacher shortages
- Weak digital infrastructure

NSS findings indicate that distance to educational institutions significantly increases dropout probabilities, particularly after primary schooling. Urban tribal populations, though smaller in proportion, benefit from better institutional infrastructure and diversified socio-economic exposure. Thus, spatial marginality compounds social disadvantage, producing layered educational inequality.

### 4.4 Poverty, Household Vulnerability, and Educational Continuity

Economic vulnerability plays a critical role in shaping educational attainment. Tribal households exhibit comparatively higher poverty levels, which affect education through:

- Seasonal migration
- Child labour participation
- Limited access to supplementary academic support
- Nutritional deprivation

NFHS-5 data indicate persistent malnutrition among ST children, which has implications for cognitive development and learning outcomes. Although attendance rates appear relatively high (80.3 per cent), irregular participation and grade repetition undermine educational continuity. Education in such contexts becomes subordinate to survival strategies, reinforcing intergenerational disadvantage.

### 4.5 Language, Culture, and Pedagogical Exclusion

Linguistic barriers represent a critical but often overlooked dimension of tribal educational disadvantage. Many tribal communities speak Santali, Kurukh, Mundari, and other indigenous languages, whereas formal instruction is largely delivered in Bengali or English.

The absence of mother-tongue instruction in early schooling contributes to:

- Comprehension difficulties
- Reduced classroom participation
- Early dropout

Research on multilingual education demonstrates that culturally responsive pedagogy and initial mother-tongue instruction

enhance retention and conceptual clarity. Although efforts have been made to introduce Santali-medium education in select areas, coverage remains limited and uneven.

### 4.6 Policy Interventions and Emerging Opportunities

Despite structural constraints, the data reveal gradual improvements and emerging opportunities:

- Expansion of Eklavya Model Residential Schools and Ashram Schools in remote districts
- Scholarship and hostelling facilities for ST students
- Mid-day meal schemes improving attendance
- Increased enrolment of tribal girls
- Improved school attendance rates (80.3 per cent among children aged 6–17 years)

**Table 4:** School Attendance among Tribal Children (6–17 years)

Category	Attendance Rate (%)
Boys	82.4
Girls	78.1
Total	80.3

Source: NFHS-5 (2019–21).

These interventions indicate that access barriers are gradually narrowing. However, quality, retention, and higher educational transition remain critical concerns.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Educational attainment among tribal communities in West Bengal remains shaped by intersecting structural disadvantages—demographic marginality, poverty, gender inequality, spatial isolation, and linguistic exclusion. While state-led interventions have expanded access and improved attendance, literacy and completion gaps persist between tribal and non-tribal populations.

The evidence suggests that educational inequality is multidimensional and cannot be addressed through infrastructure expansion alone. Achieving substantive equity requires culturally grounded, regionally targeted, and quality-oriented educational strategies that move beyond access to ensure retention, learning outcomes, and higher educational transition. Future research incorporating primary field surveys, district-level disaggregation, and longitudinal analysis would provide deeper insight into evolving educational trajectories among tribal communities.

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