Quality and Inequality in School Education: Analysing the Status of SC/ST Students in Odisha

Dr. S. Swetashree

Research Associate, DER, NCERT, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

Education is essential for both individual and societal progress, and modern education has made enormous contributions to the cause of socio-economic advancement. However, not everyone in society has the opportunity to access education, let alone quality education. Traditionally marginalised sections, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), are among the most educationally deprived, and their educational attainment continues to lag far behind other social groups. The government has adopted various educational development programmes to facilitate the SC/ST in achieving their educational progress. However, due to their marginal socio-economic status and ingrained discriminatory attitudes and practices, their educational achievement remains largely poor. Despite the fact that the literacy rates of SC/STs have improved since independence, their overall educational attainment remains unsatisfactory. SC/ST students attend schools at the bottom of the school hierarchy where they receive poor quality education in schools with inadequate infrastructure, untrained teachers, and an unsupportive environment. The paper examines the situation of educational attainment of SC/ST in school education in Odisha using primary and secondary data. It also analyses issues such as the quality of education received by SC/ST students as well as disparities in relation to other social groups. The paper focuses on enrolment, retention, dropout, and challenges linked to educational attainment of SCs and STs students.

Key words: *SC/ST, quality, inequality, access, school education, rural, Odisha*

1. Introduction

Education plays a significant role in the overall socio-economic development of an individual and the society at large. John Dewey argued, "Education is not a preparation for life, rather it is the living. Education is the process of living through a continuous reconstruction of experiences. It is the development of all those capacities in the individual which will enable him to control his environment and fulfill his possibilities" (Parray, 2020, p.5). But education, particularly quality education, is not available to all members of society. Inequality in education is one of the India's most pressing societal problems. Caste, class, gender, ethnicity, religion and geographic differences are the most important factors that influencing schooling.

Educational inequality is a major concern in Indian society, as a sizable segment of the population is deprive and marginalised in terms of educational attainment. Tilak argued, "one of the important features of Indian education is its inherent inequalitarian nature. Educational facilities are unequally distributed among the socio-economic, sex, regional, caste, and occupational groups of the population" (Tilak, 1979, p.417). In fact, the existing gaps and unequal access to education perpetuate the prevailing discriminatory and exclusionary system. For decades, disadvantage sections like scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribe (ST) have been denied access to education citing various socio-cultural and economic reasons. They entered the education system very late in comparison to other caste groups (Ambedkar, Vol. I; Paik, 2014). Despite the fact that schools were legally accessible to these people in the mid-nineteenth century, attempts by disadvantaged sections to obtain education were met with significant caste opposition. (Nambissan, 1996). According to Benjamin "If we compare with other communities/castes one could find that there is very slight improvement in the education of [Scheduled caste] despite of numerous governmental schemes, Sarwa Shiksha abhiyan and education policy of 1986" (Benjamin, 2008, p-637).

Since independence both central and the state government has undertaken multiple initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Universalization of elementary education, RTE Act 2009 etc. to expand the accessibility and improve the quality of education. Furthermore NPE 2020 recognized that "policy must provide to all students, irrespective of their place of residence, a quality education system, with particular focus on historically marginalized, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups" (p.4). However, India's education system is still a long way from achieving its long-term goals of equity, quality, and equality. India faces a significant challenge in terms of enhancing educational quality and closing the educational disparity between

different social classes. SC/ST educational attainment is typically low due to their marginal socio-cultural identity and inbuilt discrimination and exclusion in society. SC/ST students attend schools at the bottom of the educational hierarchy, with inadequate resources and attention. These children receive a poor quality education in an inadequate environment, which affects their academic achievement. Therefore it is important to understand the educational attainment of SC/ST. The study focuses on admission, retention, dropout, and difficulties linked to SC/ST student's educational attainment in elementary education, Odisha.

2. Objective of the study:

- To understand the status of the SC/ST in the school education system of Odisha.
- To analyse the causes of educational backwardness of SC/ST.
- To analyse the quality of education SC/ST students received.
- To examine the reasons behind the lack of effectiveness of various government schemes aimed at improving the educational conditions of disadvantaged children.

3. Condition of SC/ST in Odisha:

Odisha is one of India's major states, ranking 11th in terms of population with 3.47 percent and 12th in terms of literacy rate with 72.87 percent. It is one of the most mineral-rich states in the country, with an abundance of natural resources. Despite all of these mineral and natural riches, it is one of India's most backward states. According to Raghuram Rajan Committee Report (2013), Odisha is one of the 'least developed, or most backward' states of India ("Backwardness counts", 2013). Odisha is also one of the least urbanised states, with only 16.69 percent of the population living in urban areas and the remaining 83.31 percent in rural areas.

SCs/STs account for around 38.66 percent of the entire population of Odisha, with 16.53 percent belonging to the SC and 22.13 percent to the ST. Despite the fact that SC/ST make up a significant portion of the state's population, they continue to lag well behind the general population in all development indicators. In Odisha, around 90 percent of SC and 95 percent of ST continue to reside in rural areas and rely on agriculture and related activities for a living. Poverty is disproportionately prevalent among these disadvantaged groups, as studies show that poverty is concentrated in rural areas and among the agriculture labourers (Radhakrishna & Ray, 2006). In fact, according to Economic Survey of Odisha, about "41.39 percent of SC and ST communities in rural Odisha were below poverty line in 2011-12" (Odisha Economic Survey, 2016-17).

4. Educational Status of SC/ST in Odisha:

SC/ST backwardness has been exacerbated by low literacy rates and educational attainment. Being located at the bottom of socio-economic indicators, SC/ST have the lowest literacy rate in the state. SC and ST literacy rates were 69.02 and 52.24 percent, respectively, compared to the state's general literacy rate of 72.87 percent. There is a significant literacy gap between rural and urban areas, with 51.1 and 69.1 percent in ST and 62.8 and 76.2 percent in SC, respectively. Furthermore, there was a significant gender disparity in the SC and ST categories, with a more than 20 percentage point gap between male and female literacy in SC and ST. SC/ST women face intersectional disadvantage and have significantly lower literacy rates than women from other social groups.

Table No.1
Literacy of Odisha

Category	Total Literacy rate	Literacy rate in Rural area	Literacy rate in Urban area	Gender gap in Literacy
All Categories	72.87	70.22	85.75	17.58
SC	69.02	62.8	76.2	20.45
ST	52.24	51.1	69.1	22.5

Source: Census 2011

Despite significant increases in literacy rates among SC/STs over the decades, their overall educational attainment remains the lowest when compared to other groups. In reality, the educational attainment gap between SC/ST and others widens with each grade of study, peaking in higher education. In fact, as students' progress from primary to secondary school and then to higher education, their GER decreases. For example, the GER of ST at the elementary level was 105.95 percent, which fell to 68.43 percent at the secondary level, but enrolment in higher education fell significantly, falling to 12.5 percent in 2017-18 (Educational Statistics at a Glance, 2018). Similarly, the GER of SC in primary school was 108.66 percent, which decreased to 85.56 percent in secondary education, and then dropped significantly to 14.7 percent in higher education. The rapid decline in GERs from elementary to higher education reflects the educational attainment of SC/STs. It is critical to emphasise that the state's policy and programme were relatively successful at the primary level in bringing disadvantaged children to school, but it did not achieve the desired outcome at the subsequent stages of education.

Despite various policies and programmes aimed at reducing dropout rates, increasing retention, re-enrolling children, and facilitating their learning, a significant number of SC/ST children remain out of school. For example according to Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA), out of the total 70 percent of out-of-school children of the state only belonged to SC/ST groups (OPEPA, 2018-19). Furthermore, the dropout rate of SC and ST at primary level was 3.19 and 3.13 percent respectively in 2016-17 and it increased by nearly double at the secondary level to 6.50 percent and 5.58 percent in corresponding period.

The higher dropout rates during this critical period of learning are cause for concern, as they contradict the essence of inclusive policy. Due to the continuous dropout and withdrawal from schooling, the educational attainment of SC/ST children remained low and only a small section managed to reach up to higher education. Despite the fact that higher education is a source of social mobility, a large proportion of SC/ST students are denied the opportunity because only a small proportion is admitted to higher education. As Benjamin correctly stated, "if we cannot reduce the dropout rate we will not be able to think of higher education" (Benjamin, 2008, p.631). Without special attention and concerted efforts in preventing dropout and withdrawal, representation of SC/ST in various sectors of modern economy including higher education will remain out of reach for these disadvantaged children.

5. Educational Disparities: Gaps in Accessibility to Quality education

There is a lot of hierarchy and inequity in the public educational system of India. The disadvantaged sections of the society receive the poorest quality education through these hierarchical state-run schools. In terms of finance, facilities, student-teacher ratios, and educational quality, these schools are significantly diverse. Bringing attention to the school's hierarchy Velasker argued, "this hierarchy school system ranges from the exclusive, elitist public school that caters to the top of the social hierarchy, to the impoverished rural schools run by the local bodies that cater almost exclusively to the bottom, viz., the overwhelmingly poor SC/ST sections" (Velaskar, 2006, p.202).

According to OPEPA (2018-19), nearly 80 percent of children in the state attend different government schools, which are the only source of education for the vast majority of rural residents. In Odisha, about 95% of the ST and 90% of the SC population live in rural regions, and children from these groups attend government schools. Village schools, which receive limited resources and minimal attention from the state, are at the bottom of the public school hierarchy. The educational quality, infrastructure, cleanliness, teacher training, and reading materials are all lacking in these schools.

In terms of distribution of educational institutions, quality of education and infrastructure, there is a significant rural-urban disparity. SC/ST, as the least urbanised group, suffers the consequences of this existing inequity. Basic school infrastructure, such as buildings, bathrooms, boundary walls, drinking water and other necessities were lacking in rural and hilly schools. As Nambissan argues, "School in the relatively backward villages and remote adivasi regions are generally characterised by poor physical infrastructure, lack of basic amenities, as well as less than adequate numbers of teachers. Dilapidated buildings, leaking roofs and mud floors appear quite common in schools and provide a depressing atmosphere for children" (Nambissan, 2000). According to the 2018-19 OPEPA report, the State had 575 elementary and 122 secondary schools without girls' bathrooms, as well as 36957 elementary and 542 secondary schools without electricity. Again, 188 elementary schools were operating without their own school building. In addition, the state has 1866 single-room elementary schools and 1745 single-teacher elementary schools. Furthermore, according to the Panchayat Raj Department of Odisha's data, there are 18,851 villages without primary schools and 32,008 villages without secondary schools in the state. As Velasker argued, "it is important to note that the lower end of hierarchy may signify not just the most inferior quality education but no schooling at all" (Velasker, 2006, p.202). Despite the inadequate facilities and poor educational quality, disadvantaged students continue to attend these schools since they have no other options.

The government established various special residential schools, such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), Ashram schools, Ekalavaya Model Residential Schools and Kanyashram, to enhance the educational level of SC/ST children. In Odisha, the ST & SC Development Department operates 1670 educational institutions out of the total government schools (Govt. of Odisha, Annual Report, 2017-18). These schools were established to assist disadvantaged sections of society in improving their educational achievement, but they were unable to realise their objectives and offer basic facilities and infrastructure due to a lack of efficient implementation on the ground. According to the research, the majority of these schools were in remote rural settings with no boundary walls and inadequate bedding and cribs. According to a CAG report, 52 out of 182 KGBV schools lacked hostels, and several lacked boundary walls (CAG, 2015). Students are forced to live in dangerous, dirty, and uncaring surroundings far from their homes and parents. Girls are particularly vulnerable in these hostel contexts, as there have been several reports of sexual abuse. According to a report published in the Economic Times based on an RTI response, between 2010 and 2015, 155 deaths and 16 cases of sexual abuse in residential schools were documented.

Apart from that, the state government has implemented a variety of regressive policies and programmes that appear to be incompatible with improving access and quality in education, further excluding

underprivileged pupils. For instance, the government's 'closure and merger' policy, also known as 'rationalisation of schools,' in which thousands of schools with low enrolment status are being closed down. According to data, the policy not only violates the RTE's goal of universal free and compulsory education for all, but it also exacerbates social and spatial inequities, driving thousands of students to drop out, particularly in the state's isolated rural regions. Dropout rates and out-of-school children have been progressively growing in the state after implementation of the policy in 2014-15. For example, the primary school dropout rate was 1.63 in 2014-15, but it rapidly grew to 5.42 in the academic year 2018-19, while the upper primary school dropout rate was 4.21 and 6.93 in the comparable years (Odisha Economic Survey 2019-20 and 2016-17). Furthermore, there were 5152 children out of school in 2014-15, which climbed to 41656 in 2016-17 (OPEPA, 2018-19). SC/STs have unique barriers to education, both in terms of social and spatial disadvantages. The low quality, equity and quantity rural government school as well as the closure of many remote rural schools in the SC/STs habitant one of the important reason of dropout and discontinue of schooling.

6.   Why did government initiatives fall short of their objectives?

Despite the fact that the government has begun many initiatives to increase the quality of school education, the schemes have not been properly implemented. The process designed to assure quality and integrity is frequently compromised, especially in rural schools, as upper caste and landed families exert influence the school management committee and make arbitrary decisions that are often detrimental to schools and pupils. The reason for this is a lack of enthusiasm on the part of teachers, management committees, disenchanted parents, and pupils and administrative indifference to rural government schools. Following are some of the initiatives taken by the Odisha government to improve the quality and for learning enhancement but these programmes have fall short in materialising the objectives.

- Learning Enhancement Programmes (LEP): The state government has launched "learning enhancement programmes (LEP), namely Ujjwal, Utthan, and Utkarsh," which focus on subject-specific enhancement in Math, English, and Odia for pupils who are falling behind (Economic survey, 2019-20, p.172). A well-intended initiative to enhance standards has fallen short in its objectives because of diverse people involved in the programme. Lack of infrastructure, teaching aids, and basic issues such as a lack of infrastructure and teaching staff persist, rendering all efforts futile. The programmes were mostly unsuccessful due to a lack of special workbooks and trained and skilled teachers, as well as a lack of parental support and student involvement. As Puspa a school teacher said, "teachers are overburdened, and on top of that, they identified students to be enrolled in these programmes. But, these students often miss not only their regular classes but also remedial classes, because most of students who are falling behind are needed to help their parents during peak agricultural season and thus unable to participate."

- Nexus between School Management Committees (SMCs) and school teachers: SMCs in rural primary schools are responsible for improving teaching quality, ensuring good financial management, and implementing other government-formulated programmes from time to time. It also serves to create health awareness, provide sanitation facilities and develop other infrastructure in schools. However, the teachers and management frequently form a corruption nexus in which they not only misappropriate funds but also ignore their responsibility for appropriate implementation of various schemes. They both benefit from each other's actions, with the SMC condoning the absence of teachers and the instructors' neglecting their own responsibility. According to a World Bank study titled "Getting the right teachers into the right schools: managing India's teacher workforce" (2018), many government-employed teachers send proxies, who may not have basic qualifications to teach in their place Vimala et al., (2018). Proxy teachers, according to this study, are more common in isolated rural areas, and because Odisha is the least urbanised state, the number of cases is large.

- The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) initiative, which began in 1995, aimed to boost enrolment, retention, attendance, and health and nutrition among children. However, the MDM has become a centre of corruption, mismanagement, and discrimination against certain sections. The effective implementation of the scheme has been hampered by a variety of challenges, including poor quality and insufficient grains, student attendance manipulation, and financial mismanagement. The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) study on Midday Meal (2015) identified not just financial mismanagement, but also states that had diverted cash intended for the scheme. Cooking of low-quality meals in unsanitary settings, as well as inadequate and poor-quality infrastructure in the form of kitchen sheds and utensils, were widespread and putting children's health at risk. Students have been admitted to hospitals for food poisoning as a result of faulty cooking, the use of dirty water for cooking, the use of dirty utensils, and even an unhealthy eating environment. According to a report, in 2013-14, 210 students from 19 schools in Odisha felt unwell after consuming MDM and had to be hospitalised. On several occasions, SC/ST students were served at the end and forced to eat their MDM while sitting in an unsanitary location far away from upper caste students. Due to these caste-based discriminations, they were also forbidden

from using water sources for washing plates, hands, or drinking, and some students would only drink water when they returned home.

Conclusion:

Despite the fact that India's constitution guarantees all children free and compulsory education, disadvantaged children's access to quality education remains a serious issue, particularly in rural areas. Various schemes and programmes have been implemented by governments to promote education among the disadvantaged sections, like SC/ST, but efforts to incorporate these previously excluded groups have been met with numerous challenges. SC/ST students face a variety of hurdles, each one more difficult than the last. These traditionally marginalised social groups make every attempt to gain access to education, but they continue to confront numerous obstacles inside the hierarchical education system, including educational institutions' apathy and hostility. While primary school enrolment has increased significantly, data shows that the state has had less success in lowering dropouts and withdrawal of disadvantaged students. In the field of education, success and failure have been largely individualized, overlooking the dynamic interaction between the students, educational settings and the society at large. To maximise the benefits of education, the government must proactively seek out solutions to address unequal treatment of disadvantaged groups. It must provide adequate resources for all students, regardless of their affiliation with a specific school. A strong educational system, strong political commitment, and real implementation of multiple programmes were required to guarantee equal access and quality education to all, particularly the most disadvantaged.

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