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SCHEDULED TRIBES AND SCHOOL EDUCATION: ANALYSIS OF A HOUSEHOLD SURVEY IN MAYURBHANJ DISTRICT OF ODISHA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the educational status of children from the Munda, Kolha, and Santal tribals with survey data from three blocks of Mayurbhanj district, which has the highest concentration of tribal population in Odisha. The result shows that the dropout rate is higher in the age group of 15-16 years (secondary level), as compared to 6-14 years (primary level). Among the three communities, Kolha children are more likely to discontinue their schooling at the primary level than Munda and Santal children, whereas the dropout rate of children from the three communities is almost the same at the secondary level. The completion rate of children is higher for Munda and Kolha than Santal children at the secondary level. The educational attainments of children are affected by several factors. The paper also briefly discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the access of tribal children to schooling owing to the digital divide and what the National Policy of Education, 2020 (NEP, 2020) could imply for tribal children. The NEP 2020 neither acknowledges the problems wrought by the unprecedented pandemic and other longstanding issues related to tribal education nor suggests any creative roadmap to address these issues. The paper explores the need for the state to evolve a tribe specific policy for primary and secondary education in view of structural problems that impede advances in schooling outcomes in scheduled areas in the country

Key words: School Education, Dropout, Tribal Education, Pandemic, and National Educational Policy: 2020

JEL Classification: I240, I250, I26

1. Introduction

There are conflicting views on India's education policy with regard to tribal inclusion: from optimism to despair, from being viewed as an instrument of social transformation to a conservative bureaucracy that reproduces social inequality and from producing a techno-economic generation to the annihilation of indigenous values and traditions (Kumar, 1996, Jyotsna and Dhir, 2005, Vaidyanathan and Nair, 2001). However, there is a general consensus that the blueprint agendas of tribal[1] education policy failed to pay attention to the aspirations of Adivasi communities and their alienation from land and resources. As Emile Durkheim (1956) has argued, education has a distinctive societal meaning and needs to be located within the social context. This social context of education did not receive due attention and the policies led to either exclusion or adverse inclusion, whereby tribals have been displaced from their native land/space, reduced to wage labourers and thus subjected to 'adverse incorporation', into the larger economy and society (Xaxa and Nathan, 2012). Access to quality education seems to be a privilege in a hierarchical society like India. The rapid expansion of science and technology in India did not trickle down to the tribal communities. As political economist Arun Ghosh (1992) has noted, the most important element in education policy should

1 This paper uses the words 'tribe' and 'adivasi' interchangeably to indicate the indigenous people of India.

be to make primary education accessible to all children. The Indian education system not only failed to address the element of 'inclusion' but also reproduced societal inequalities (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008; Subramanian, 2019).

The values that children internalise in the current education system and the potential within the system to comprehend the socio-cultural and spatial premises of their communities have been questioned by educationists and tribal communities (Jindal, 2015).The system often forces students from the most vulnerable sections to abandon the learning process mid-way. Therefore, the demand for an education system that takes into account the 'perspective from below' has found prominence in academic discourses (Pathak, 2002, Kumar, 1996). The situation needs further enquiry in the wake of the National Education Policy (NEP 2020).

The unidirectional system of education seeks to assimilate diverse cultures into a mainstream culture[2]. As N.K. Ambasht argues, "our school textbooks have no ethnographic account of any of the contemporary tribal societies living in our midst, resulting a total non-appreciation of the strengths of their cultures and values. This leads to a decreasing awareness of tribal identities, particularly those who undergo the process of schooling" (Ambasht, 2002:153). In this backdrop, by analysing a household survey, interviews and case study methods, this paper tries to elucidate the factors that are affecting educational attainment of tribal students in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. It also examines the government's educational schemes and state intervention during the

2 Assimilation and isolation are the two major theoretical presumptions came up in post-colonial India for the welfare and inclusion of scheduled tribes. Proponents of the idea of assimilation, mainly sociologist G.S Ghurye, advocated for assimilating these spatially isolated and 'backward Hindu' communities into the mainstream through a slow and frictionless education mechanism. On the contrary, Verrier Elwin had the opinion that the deplorable and impoverished condition of Adivasis is due to their interaction with outside world, which had led them to indebtedness and alienation.

Covid-19 pandemic to explore how these interventions impact tribal education.

The paper seeks to look beyond generalised assumptions implicit in phrases used to explain the dismal state of tribal education in India such as 'they are incompatible to this', 'lack of political will',' because of poverty' and 'education policy of the neo-liberal state is succumbed to global finance capital'. These statements have some grains of truths but they also tend to obscure the underlying dynamics of tribal education.

Dilemmas and difficulties confronting tribal education, especially in the most impoverished regions, have persisted over more than seven decades of varying socio-economic and welfare policy contexts. The study shows that education has done little to empower tribal communities to address livelihood issues they encounter on a daily basis. The paucity of institutional [schools] reforms at the village level seems to be undoing the potential and goals of special education centres like *Ekalavya* Memorial Residential School (EMRS) and other schools.

1.1 The Study Area[3] and the Communities

With the Scheduled Tribes (ST) constituting around 60 per cent of its population, Mayurbhanj district exhibits a unique physical and socio-economic diversity. Situated in the north-east corner of the state of Odisha, the district shares inter-state boundary with Jharkhand and West Bengal. Influences of the culture of these two bordering states are well-marked in the adjoining areas of this district. The district is endowed with rich forest, which has provided a favourable physical environment and resource base for the tribal communities, who comprise 58.58 per cent of tribal population in the state (Census, 2011).[4]

3 See Appendix 6

4 The total forest area of 4038 sqkms in 2009 (39.16 per cent of the geographical area of the district).

The Santal are the largest and the more advanced tribes scattered all over Mayurbhanj district. Their main occupation is agriculture. The Kolha tribes have their own tribal dialect. Of the tribes of the region, Kolha are less proficient in the field of education. The Mundas have their own language and majority of them are settled agriculturalists and agriculture labourers and also depended on the non-timber forest produce (NTFP) for livelihood. Though Santal tribes are comparatively advanced in terms of education and occupational status than the other tribes, their spatial location 30 to 40 km away from the town, limits their access to the outside world. The Munda habitation areas are only 10 to 15 km away from the town. The Kolha tribes live 120 to 130 km away from the district headquarter Baripada.

2. Survey Design and Methodology

This study collected quantitative and qualitative data from 125 households of Kolha, Munda and Santal tribes in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha regarding children of school-going age (within the age group of 6-16 years) and their older siblings in these households.As the focus of the study is on school education, the emphasis was on children of school-going age. The survey was conducted only from rural households (with the help of a female translator) and was subject to the availability of and willingness of respondents. The study also draws upon secondary sources such as books, journal articles, government, and NGO reports. More recently, telephonic interviews were conducted with respondents from the study area and other tribal dominant regions in the state to understand how school going tribal children were coping with difficulties wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 2.1 shows the distribution of children of school going age from the household survey.

Table: 2.1. Distribution of sample children within the age group of 6-16 years

Three Communities	6-14 years	15-16 years	6-16 years
Munda	140 (27%)	24 (27%)	164 (27%)
Kolha	251 (48%)	34 (39%)	285 (46%)
Santal	134 (25%)	30 (34%)	164 (27%)
Total	525	88	613

Source: Household Survey: 2017

Out of 613 students, 525 (86 per cent) were in the age group of 6-14 years and 88 (14 per cent) students were in the age group of 15-16 years. During the household survey, children were asked their current age and the number of years of schooling completed by them. We found four categories of children during the survey i.e. (i) continuing schooling, (ii) completed schooling (iii) dropout children and (iv) children with no schooling. A cross tabulation was used to understand the pattern of community-wise schooling attainment according to age for tribal children in the age groups of 6 to 14 years and 15 to 16 years.

3. Analysis

Educational attainment is measured in terms of the number of years of schooling completed. If a student joined a school at the age of 6 plus years and has continued schooling up to the age of 14 years, then he/she would have completed eight years of education by the end of 14 years. But if he/she joined the primary level of education at the age of six-plus years, but has not continued schooling up to the age of 14 years, then that student is considered as a dropout. Based on this criterion the number of dropout students is calculated for primary level student.

With regard to secondary level, if a student joined at the age of 15 years, and if he/she has continued schooling up to the age of 16 years, then that student would have completed secondary-level education by the end of 16 years. But if he/she joined a secondary level of school at the age of 15 years but has not continued schooling up to the age of 16 years, then he/she is considered as a dropout. Based on the above logic, the number of dropout students is calculated for secondary level student.

3.1. Age-wise Educational Status of Tribal children

Table: 3.1. Educational Status of school going age children in the primary (6-14 years)* and Secondary Level (15-16 years)**

Educational Status	Lower Primary level (6-10 years)	Upper Primary level (11-14 years)	Primary Level (6-14 years)	Secon-dary Level (15-16 years)	Total (6-16 years)
Continuing	242 (99%)	165 (59%)	407 (77%)	38 (43%)	445 (72%)
Dropout	3 (1%)	33 (12%)	36 (7%)	36 (41%)	72 (15%)
Completed		79 (28%	79 (15%)	14 (16%)	93(12%)
No Schooling		3 (1%)	3 (1%)		3(1%)
Total	245	280	525	88	613

Source: Household Survey: 2017

* As per the SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan) norms children of 6 to 14 years are considered Primary Level students and also considered as I-VIII std. student.

** Similarly, 15 to 16 years children are considered as Secondary Level Student and also considered as IX-X std. student.

Note: The values indicated in the tables in this paper are the number of the children in each category. The percentage equivalent is mentioned in the brackets.

Table 3.1 shows that children begin to dropout from school from the age bracket of 6 to 10 years onwards, and the dropout rate increases with increase in age. A majority of children dropout before completing 7th or 8th standard. There may be full enrolment of children at the younger age group (6-10 years) as none of the children were reported to have no schooling. The dropout rate decreased over the years and it is higher among the children as age increases. Thus, there seems to be increasing enrolment and decreasing dropout over the time in the age group of 6 to 14 years. At the secondary level, it can be observed that children begin to dropout from the age of 15 years and most of the children who transitioned to the secondary level dropped out at the age of 16 years.

The RTE Act (2009) ensures free and compulsory education for all children within the age group of 6-14 years. Field evidence shows that drop out may be linked to several factors including the lack of provision of mid-day meal, at secondary level and difficulties in coping with the increased demands of the syllabus at secondary level. Children who are first generation learners are especially disadvantaged in terms of support from parents. Further, among families that depend on wage labour and farming, a section of parents may seek to augment family income by putting their older children to work. We next examine the community wise educational status in Table 3.1.1.

Table 3.1.1 shows that a higher proportion of Kolha children (10%) dropout before completing primary education than Munda (4%) and Santal (4%). Evidence from the field survey (discussed later) also suggests that parents who are daily wage labourers had difficulty coordinating their working hours with the children's school timing. Because parents leave for work very early, they wereunable to ensure that children were attending school. At the same time, the school authorities do not inform the parents of non-attendance by children leading to higher drop out rates. Santal and Munda children do better in terms of retention at the primary level than Kolha children. Munda

Table: 3.1.1. Community wise Educational Status at Primary and Secondary Level

	Table: 3.1.1 Munda					
	Primary Level (6-14 years)		Total (6-14 years)	Secondary Level (15 to 16 years)		Total (15 to 16 years)
	6-10 Years	11-14 Years		15Years	16 years	
Continuing	55	43 (51%)	98 (70%)	8 (89%)		8 (33%)
Dropout		5 (6%)	5 (4%)	1 (11%)	9 (60%)	10 (42%)
Completed		37 (43%)	37 (26%)		6 (40%)	6 (25%)
Total	55	85	140	9	15	24
	Kolha					
	Primary Level (6-14 years)		Total (6-14 years)	Secondary Level (15 to 16 years)		Total (15-16 years)
	6-10 Years	11-14 Years		15 years	16 years	
Continuing	123 (98%)	77 (62%)	200 (80%)	15 (71%)		15 (44%)
Dropout	3 (2%)	23 (18%)	26 (10%)	6 (29%)	8 (62%)	14 (41%)
Completed		22 (18%)	22 (9%)		5 (38%)	5 (15%)
No Schooling		3 (2%)	3 (1%)			
Total	126	125	251	21	13	34
	Santal					
	Primary Level (6-14 years)		Total (6-14 years)	Secondary Level (15 to 16 years)		Total (15-16 years)
	6-10 Years	11-14 Years		15 years	16 years	
Continuing	64	45 (64%)	109 (81%)	15 (83%)		15 (50%)
Dropout		5 (7%)	5 (4%)	3 (17%)	9 (75%)	12 (40%)
Completed		20 (29%)	20 (15%)		3 (25%)	3 (10%)
Total	64	70	134	18	12	30

Source: Household Survey: 2017

children do better in terms of completion of schooling followed by Santal children, but only two-third Kolha children in this age group completing school. However, unlike Santal and Munda children, a small proportion of Kolha children have had no schooling.

An interesting pattern is observed in the secondary school going age group of children. Here the completion rate of Kolha children is better than that of Santal children. Once the Kolha children overcome the initial hurdles and reach the secondary level, they fare on par with or relatively better than Santal. There could be several reasons behind this. The household location of Kolhas varies with some staying closer to the school and some closer to non-tribal houses. This may create conditions favourable for a section of Kolha children to complete secondary level of education. Another factor may be the economic mobility achieved after the state government decision to implement minimum support price (MSP) for non-timber forest produces (NTFP)[5]in 2014. Sumati (43 years), a Kolha mother form Rajabasa village in Sukruli block, pointed out how recent material changes such as access to two wheelers may be enabling access to school. "I bought a second hand scooter last year. Travelling to the nearest town is very easy now. Often, I use it to drop my child at school as well. She [the child] likes the ride and seems very happy. My child's teacher told me that she scored well in the final examination." These changes are indicative of some of the changes that may be underway.

The following section analyses the household characteristics and the school related characteristics of Munda, Kolha, and Santal children from the sample.

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5 In 2014 Odisha government initiated a mechanism for marketing of NTFP (Non Timber Forest Product) through minimum support price (MSP) and development of value chain for NTFP under Tribal Development Co-operative Corporation of Odisha (TDCCO). Currently 40 items, including popular NTFPs like *mahuva, tendu,* and honey, are covered under this scheme.

4. Factors affecting Educational Attainment of Tribal Children

Available evidence from previous studies reveals that most of the tribal children engage in traditional occupations such as cattle grazing, wage labour, collecting firewood and NTFP, stone quarrying, mining, and home-based work such as processing forest products. The level of utilization of technology in the tribal areas has remained abysmally low. Lakshmi (2003), identified that the medium of instruction, the appointment of non-tribal teachers in tribal areas, and communication gap between the teachers and tribal children are the major causes of high dropout rates in tribal schools (Cited in Anbuselvi G & Leeson P. John). Sahu (2014) found that the physical location of the village, economic condition, attitude of the parents, lack of interest on part of the village education committees and teacher-related problems such as create obstacles in tribal education.

This study examines the relationship between the educational status of primary and secondary school going age children with their household characteristics (parental education and occupation) and the distance from school. The details related to household characteristics and school characteristics of children are given in Appendix No. 1 to 5.

4.1 Household Factors

4.1.1 Father's Education

Table No. 4.1.1 Munda

Father Education	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
No Schooling	3 (15%)	17 (85%)	7 (87%)	1 (13%)
Primary	1(9%)	10 (91%)	2 (40%)	3 (60%)
>Primary	1 (9%)	10 (91%)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)
Total	5 (12%)	37 (88%)	10 (62%)	6 (28%)

Cont'd.....

Kolha				
Father Education	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
No Schooling	16 (64%)	9 (36%)	8 (89%)	1 (11%)
Primary	10 (44%)	13 (56%)	6 (67%)	3 (33%)
>Primary				1 (100%)
Total	26 (54%)	22 (46%)	14(74%)	5 (26%)
Santal				
Father Education	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
No Schooling	5(36%)	9(64%)	10 (100%)	
Primary		4(100%)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)
>Primary		7(100%)	1 (50%)	1 (50%)
Total	5(20%)	20(80%)	12 (80%)	3 (20%)

Household Survey: 2017

Table 4.1.1 shows a positive correlation between father's education and children's educational status at primary and secondary levels. When the father has no schooling, children are more prone to drop out than when the father has some schooling. This is true across tribal groups both at the primary and secondary level but especially pronounced among Kolha children at the primary level. Similarly, the completion rate of children also increases with rise in the father's educational attainment. This suggests that father's education has an influence on children's education. Munda children have a higher completion rate than both Santhals and Kolhas when father's have no schooling at both the primary and secondary level of education. This corroborates with the field survey observation that fathers of children from the Munda tribe expressed greater concern towards education as compared to Santhals and Kolhas.

4.1.2 Mother's Education

Table No. 4.1.2 Munda				
Mother Education	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
No Schooling	4(14%)	24(86%)	8(80%)	2(20%)
Primary	1(12%)	7(88%)	2(33%)	4(67%)
>Primary		6(100%)		
Total	5(12%)	37(88%)	10(62%)	6(38%)
Kolha				
Mother Education	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
No Schooling	24(12%)	14(88%)	12(86%)	2(14%)
Primary	2(20%)	8(80%)	2(40%)	3(60%)
Total	26(54%)	22(46%)	14(74%)	5(26%)
Santal				
Mother Education	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
No Schooling	4(25%)	12(75%)	12(86%)	2(14%)
Primary	1(17%)	5(83%)		
>Primary		3(100%)		1(100%)
Total	5(20%)	20(80%)	12(80%)	3(20%)

Household Survey: 2017

Table 4.1.2 shows no clear correlation between mother's education and children's schooling at the primary level but it is noticeable that Santal children whose mothers have no schooling, have a relatively higher drop out rate than children from the other groups in the same category. Compared to primary school going age children, the drop out rate is higher for children at the secondary level even when the mother has some schooling. When the mother has more than primary education, the schooling outcomes of children is distinctly better but among Kolhas, none of the children had mothers with more than primary level education.

4.1.3 Father's Occupation

Table No. 4.1.3 Munda				
Father Occupation	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
Wage Labour/NTFP	4(11%)	31(89%)	10(77%)	3(23%)
Farmer	1(100%)			1(100%)
Carpenter/Small business		3(100%)		2(100%)
Government Job*		3(100%)		
Total	5(12%)	37(88%)	10(62%)	6(38%)
Kolha				
Father Occupation	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
Wage Labour/NTFP	26(57%)	20(43%)	14(78%)	4(22%)
Farmer		2(100%)		1(100%)
Total	26(54%)	22(46%)	14(74%)	5(26%)
Santal				
Father Occupation	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
Wage Labour/NTFP	3(33%)	6(67%)	5(100%)	
Farmer	2(14%)	12(86%)	7(78%)	2(22%)
Carpenter/Small Business		1(100%)		
Government Job*		1(100%)		1(100%)
Total	5(20%)	20(80%)	12(80%)	3(20%)

Household Survey: 2017

* Clerical and defence servant

Table 4.1.3 shows that drop out rate is higher when the father's occupation is wage labour and farming, which are the dominant occupations of fathers of children in the sample. Children of fathers who work in farming, carpentry and small business and government job seem to be completing their studies at both levels.It is striking that the dropout

rate of children is higher among Santals compared to the other groups when the father is a wage labourer.

Among the Kolhas, the father's occupation is restricted to wage labour and farming, which shows relative economic vulnerability. The drop out rate is higher for primary school going age Kolha children when the father is a wage labourer. Overall, even when the father is a wage labourer, primary school going age Munda children fare relatively better than children of the other groups.

Conversation with these fathers revealed that many of them want their children to contribute to household income because of poverty and unemployment. The depletion of forest resources has affected the livelihoods of the Kolha community and may be negatively affecting schooling outcomes of children.

Children of government employed men have better schooling outcomes across the communities but the vast majority of children in the sample belong to families that depend on wage labour or farming. It was observed in the field that Mundas and Santals do seek job opportunities in the towns and cities during the non-agricultural season. However, overall, a high proportion of children whose fathers were wage labourers were able to complete primary level schooling (except among the Kolhas).

4.1.4 Mother's Occupation

Table No. 4.1.4 Munda

Mother Education	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
Wage Labour/NTFP	4(11%)	31(89%)	10(77%)	3(23%)
Farmer	1(33%)	2(67%)		3(100%)
Domestic duties*		3(100%)		
Government Job*		1(100%)		
Total	5(12%)	37(88%)	10(62%)	6(38%)

Cont'd.....

Kolha				
Mother Occupation	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
Wage Labour/NTFP	26(56%)	20(44%)	14(78%)	4(22%)
Farmer		2(100%)		1(100%)
Total	26(54%)	22(46%)	14(74%)	5(26%)
Santal				
Mother Occupation	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
Wage Labour/NTFP	2(22%)	7(78%)	4(100%)	
Farmer	2(15%)	12(85%)	7(78%)	2(22%)
Domestic duties*	1(50%)	1(50%)	1(50%)	1(50%)
Total	5(20%)	20(80%)	12(80%)	3(20%)

Household Survey: 2017
*Mother who is engaged in unpaid domestic work
** Working as primary teacher

Table 4.1.4 shows that, as in the case of fathers' occupation, when women are engaged in wage labour their children are more likely to drop out of education at the primary and secondary level. Among the three communities, when the mother works as wage labourer, the dropout rate is higher for Kolhas at primary level, whereas this rate is higher for Santal at secondary level. The Kolha children are relatively more disadvantaged because there were no children whose mothers' were employed in the government sector or engaged in unpaid domestic work. There is only one child (Munda) whose mother had a government job and this child had completed primary level. There were five children whose mothers were engaged in unpaid domestic work and only one of these children was a drop out. We observed in the field that mothers who were engaged in domestic duties were educated (at least up to the primary level) and therefore were able to monitor their children's schooling. The compulsion on women to work seems to be greater among

the Kolhas as none of the children had mothers' involved in domestic duties. This tie in with the explanation provided earlier, that among Kolhas, parents were less able to monitor children's school attendance owing to the nature of their work. At the secondary level, however, Kolha children fare better than Santal children and are on par with Munda children on comparable categories of mothers' occupation.

4.2 School Characteristics- Distance to School

Table No. 4.2.1 Munda				
Distance to School	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
<=2km	2(10%)	17(89%)	4(57%)	3(43%)
>2 to 5km	3(33%)	6(67%)	3(75%)	1(25%)
>5km		14(100%)	3(60%)	2(40%)
Total	5(12%)	37(88%)	10(62%)	6(38%)
Kolha				
Distance to School	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
<=2km	8(57%)	6(43%)	4(100%)	
>2 to 5km	17(61%)	11(39%)	9(75%)	3(25%)
>5km	1(17%)	5(83%)	1(33%)	2(67%)
Total	26(54%)	22(46%)	14(74%)	5(26%)
Santal				
Distance to School	Primary Level		Secondary Level	
	Dropout	Completed	Dropout	Completed
<=2km	2(40%)	3(60%)	8(89%)	1(11%)
>2 to 5km	2(13%)	13(87%)	4(100%)	
>5km	1(20%)	4(80%)		2(100%)
Total	5(20%)	20(80%)	12(80%)	3(20%)

Household Survey: 2017

K. Sujatha (2000), observed that ST children in Andhra Pradesh are unable to enrol in school, because of structural barriers such as difficult terrain, inaccessible locations, and spatially dispersed habitations. Table 4.2.1 shows that the distance of school from the homes of tribal children does affect schooling attainments at both primary and secondary levels but not in a consistent way.Notable is the high drop out among Kolha children whose school was less than 5 km from the home. By contrast, Kolha children's attainment was relatively better in schools more than 5 km from home. At the primary level, most of the children in schools that were more than 5 km away had completed school. Only 10 students were in schools that were more than 5 km away at the secondary level and numbers of children in such schools were relatively small at the primary level as well. The schools that are more than 5 km are likely to be those that provide hostel facilities for children making parental monitoring less important.

Odisha has one of the largest numbers of hostels for tribal students. In 2020 Odisha become the first state in the country to receive ISO certification for hostels meant for tribal students. Mayurbhanj district has 104 *Ashram* schools.[6] Among the three communities, it was found that fewer children from Kolha (17%) and Santal (20%) discontinue when distance to school is more than 5 km away from their habitation at primary level and none of the children from Munda at primary level are also discontinuing their schooling in this category. In the case of the ST children, living in hostels may provide a more enabling environment to complete school.

Thus, parental education and occupation as well as the location of habitation and access to schools with hostel facilitiesare important factors that influence the educational attainment of Munda, Kolha and Santal children in Mayurbhanj.

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6 In 2019 Odisha government launched 'Mission Suvidya' to ensure the quality of amenities for scheduled category students residing in government hostels.

5. Educational Schemes

Many schemes are designed to prevent the dropout of school children. The centrally sponsored scheme like Mid-Day Meal (MDM)[7]plays a vital role to mitigate classroom hunger and ensure nutritional security of children in school. The Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA)[8] and Right to Education Act (RTE ACT)[9] also play a significant role in mitigating the cost of education and in bridging the gap between boys and girls in attaining school education. There are schools, especially for girls from disadvantaged communities such as the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBVs)[10] and National Programme for Education of Girls at Elementary Level (NPEGEL).[11] However, the numbers of KGBVs and NPEGEL are minimal. The majority of the girls from the disadvantaged communities are unable to take full advantage of these schemes. The schools are not well maintained by the government. The Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRSs)[12] are funded by the Government for the welfare of the Scheduled Tribes. However, admission

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7 Mid-Day Meal Scheme (MDMS): It is a school meal programme for school-age children nationwide to raise the level of nutrition of children and enable them to develop in a healthy manner.

8 Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)*:* Launched in 2001 and aims to include universal access and retention, bridging of gender and social category gaps in elementary education, and achieving significant enhancement in learning levels of children.

9 Right to Education Act (RTE ACT) 2009 envisaged under Article 21-A, ensures every child's right to full time elementary education of satisfactory and equitable quality in a formal school which satisfies certain essential norms and standards.

10 KGBVs are residential upper primary schools for girls from the SC, ST, OBC and Muslim communities set up in areas of scattered habitations where schools are at great distances and attending those is challenge to the security of the girls. They were launched in July 2004.

11 NPEGEL, is a is a special component of the SSA, launched in 2003,to provide additional support for enhancing girls' education over and above the investments for girls' education through the normal SSA interventions.

12 EMRSs are centrally sponsored special residential schools for the most vulnerable tribal communities and are being managed by the central government since 1998.

is based on 'merit'. The students who are first generation learners find it difficult to gain admission to these schools. Such schemes fail to recognise that the notion of 'merit' is highly related to the initial endowments in the caste-ridden Indian society (Subramanian 2019).

5.1 Special Schemes for Mayurbhanj District

The PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas) [13] Act, 1996 has made it mandatory for the states having scheduled areas to make specific provisions for entrusting a certain amount of powers to the tribes on the matters relating to decision-making and development of their community. A centrally-sponsored government scheme of *Ashram*[14] schools exclusively for the ST children from elementary to higher secondary levels was initiated in the 1970s. Another special programme under SSA in Mayurbhanj District is "*Mu Bi Padhibi* (I will also read)". The vision of this programme is to make the Mayurbhanj district free of out-of-school children. However, this policy has remained unsuccessful and no such programme has been implemented for the secondary level students to prevent them from discontinuing schooling. It should be noticed that even after the introduction of many schemes by both the central and state governments, universalization of elementary education of tribal children seems to be a distant dream. The dropout rate is disproportionately higher among the secondary level

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13 Thirteen districts in Odisha have scheduled Areas. The Act provide certain amount of autonomy to the tribal communities to protect them from exploitation by making Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayat centres of self-governance and has laid special thrust to empower Gram Sabhas which has not been done throughany other Act in any State.

14 The state has 766 *Ashram* Schools (Elementary level), 505 *Sevashrams* (Primary level), 19 Educational Complexes for providing education facilities to students belonging to the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), 2 Secondary Training School, 1 B.Ed. College and 13 Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) managed by the Odisha Model Tribal Education Society (OMTES). As of 2019, the state SC/ST department runs as many as 6500 hostels with over 5.7 lakh students.

students (within the age group of 15-16 year old students) in comparison to primary level students (within the age group of 6-14 years).

6. Education during Pandemic: Ground Realities

It is also essential to understand the current realities in the study area in the pretext of the on-going novel coronavirus pandemic. The following are the excerpts of the telephonic interview[15] of the parents and students in the study area. With schools under lockdown, the state government decided to start online education for Class X students through the Diksha mobile application after April 14, 2020. State Minister of Education, Samir Ranjan Dash said students to be promoted to Class 10 this year will be imparted online teaching by teachers from their homes (Indian Express, 12 April 2020). As online classes fail to reach most students due to poor mobile connectivity, the Odisha government has turned to radio to reach out the children in remote areas of the state. The Education Department has launched classroom teaching through All India Radio (AIR) from the last week of September 2020 (The Hindu, September 27, 2020).

The following case studies and interviews with tribal families in Mayurbhanj district further elucidate the difficulties faced by the communities during the on-going Covid-19 pandemic. It is clear from the case studies that the pandemic has generated another set of challenges and seems to be exacerbating their vulnerabilities in attaining education.

Mantu is an 8th standard day scholar from Rajabasa village in Surkuli block. His school is six kilometre away from home. Until 15 September 2020 he has neither received books nor been able to attend the online classes. His parents are agricultural labourers, and he is a first generation learner. His younger sisters (Rajani and Renta) are in 6th and

15 Name of the interviewees are changed in the text to keep their privacy

4th standards respectively. They also have not received any study material from the school. “I have lost my ration card, and we have not received rice amidst the lockdown. We are struggling to make ends meet. I asked the school authorities about the books and mid-day meals, but they cannot provide us the food grains. Because of the containment zone, our area was sealed. So, we did not receive anything”, said his father (Personal communication, September 15, 2020).

Aladi Singh, an eleven- year old sixth standard girl from Munda community in the village of Kuldiha, from Shamakhunta block, lives with her six-member family. She was attending the government school near to her home until lockdown. Although she has received books from the school, she does not get guidance in studies either from parents or family members. She used to go to her classmate’s house to attend online classes at the beginning but stopped going there after a small skirmish broke out between the two families over a land boundary dispute. Mid-day meal programme has also stopped. Before the lockdown, her mother used to work as a labourer near to their home. Her father occasionally worked as casual labour at a construction site twenty kilometres away from their village. However, at present, both of them are out of work, which has negatively affected their ability to provide for basic needs. Aladi has received only three kg of rice since the beginning of school closure, and her school stipend has not been transferred to her father’s account yet. There is a provision of 100-gram rice per day for student who attends 1st to 5th standard and 150-gram rice for 6 to 8th standard students. Students who attend 1st to 5th standard and 6 to 8th standard respectively are also entitled to get 400 rupees and 700 rupees for vegetables and eggs, during the lockdown. However, students from remote locations have not got the benefit from this facility.

Debesh, a 9th standard student from Tadakijharan village in Khunta block has a different story to tell. He belongs to a Santal family. His father Saroj Marandi was employed as a construction worker in

Ranchi for three years. Now he is out of work; however, he managed to buy a refurbished smart phone at the cost of Rs.5000 for his son's online classes. But one year back he had borrowed an amount of Rs. 20,000 from a local moneylender. The moneylender came to know about the mobile phone and started harassing Marandi to repay the loan. Finally, Marandi had to sell his four goats to repay the debt. "Right now, my son has a mobile phone, but we lost our goats. This phone needs to be recharged on alternative days because online class need a minimum of 1.5 GB data for a day. For this we are always dependent on the local shop because we don't have the knowledge and capability to recharge our phones. Therefore, the shop owner often charges extra money over the recharge amount. I recharged his phone for one month, but now the money is exhausted, I don't know what to do now", said Saroj Marandi (Personal communication, September 17, 2020).

At the end of September 2020, the much-promised government initiative like Shiksha Samparka[16] has not yet reached this village. Manjoj Kumar Nag, a high school teacher from Mayurbhanj district says, "The government knows that from the six million students in the state, only 2.2 million have access to education online. Though specific apps such as Siksha, Sanjog, Dakhyata, and Madhu have reached the middle and lower classes in the state well, the most vulnerable tribal communities in Mayurbhanj District are largely left out from these initiatives" (Personal communication, September 21, 2020).

Disruption of livelihood activities such as the collection of non-timber minor forest produces (NTFPs) is a major issue in Baria village in Sukruli Block at the time of the pandemic. Jharana (13) is a day scholar in a nearby school who belongs to the Santal tribe from Badajamuna village. She is a single child in her three-member family. Her family is solely dependent upon NTFP for livelihood. Generally, March to June

16 A state government initiated program that would send teachers to villages to teach children who has excluded from the government's online classes.

is the peak time for the collection of produces like *Mahua, Kendu* and *Amla*. For years the business was lucrative and provided for the needs of a small family. But the lockdown rendered the collection and sale of forest products difficult. As the local bazaars were closed, people were forced to sell these products to middlemen and money lenders at comparatively lower rates. Before the lockdown government-run, tribal societies were responsible for price-fixing. At present many such organizations have become dysfunctional because of strict lockdown regulations. "I have earned only Rs.1400 so far, and with this money, I have to look after my child and my diabetic wife. In these circumstances, I can't even think of buying a smartphone for my child that costs more than 5000 rupees", said Jharana's father Debendra Nath (Personal communication, September 24, 2020).

These case studies reveal the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on the social and economic life of scheduled tribes in the district. The newly introduced educational measures by the state government have not yet reached the communities. Such a scenario might further exacerbate the educational backwardness of these vulnerable communities in the long run. The sample schools illustrate the disparate nature of educational establishment for tribal children, especially at the secondary level, where the dropout rate is remarkably high. Though qualified teachers were available and schools had average physical infrastructure, but the number of teachers was not adequate in the government schools for them to function properly. It is not only because of mid-day meals but also these schools hardly able to provide extra-curricular opportunities, like sports and games opportunities for secondary-level students. It is evident from the data that there is no substantial policy initiative to curb the drop-out rates— especially at the secondary level—of the most impoverished tribal children. The situation necessitates looking into the newly designed policy framework, especially the National Education Policy 2020, in the context of tribal education.

7. New Education Policy 2020: Answer to Systemic Failures?

The field survey shows that there is a plethora of unaddressed systemic issues within the tribal education system in Mayurbhanj district. Therefore, the expectation from the most anticipated New Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) was high among the educationists in the country (Ramaswami, 2019), because experience of Munda, Kolha and Santal communities in Mayurbhanj district more or less represents the state of tribal education in different part of the country. The following is a brief discussion on the NEP 2020 policy document viz-a-viz tribal education.

The roadmaps offered in the Policy to address the dropout rates are significant. The document cites the 75th Round household survey by NSSO in 2017-18, which showed that the number of out of school children in the age group of 6 to 17 years is 3.22 crore. 'It will be a top priority to bring these children back into the educational fold as early as possible, and to prevent further students from dropping out, with a goal to achieve 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio in preschool to secondary level by 2030. A concerted national effort will be made to ensure universal access and afford opportunity to all children of the country to obtain quality holistic education–including vocational education - from pre-school to Grade 12.' (NEP, 2020 p.10).This is promising, but the document is silent about the inclusion of the most disadvantaged categories like scheduled tribes, who need special attention.

The document also proposes online learning for the socially excluded at the *anganvadi* level, which is a pipe dream for communities like Kolha in Mayurbhanj because the availability and affordability of a high speed internet is a mirage in their habitats.[17] The document self-contradicts when it comes to providing equitable access to education. At one place, the policy says education is a public service but it goes on

17 A report by the ministry of statistics in 2017 says that over 85 per cent of the households in rural India—that has a population of 500 million—do not have access to any digital device, including smartphones, tablets, laptops etc. For details see the reference.

to advocate philanthropic private participation, which one could see as a recipe for private education and can have disastrous consequences for vulnerable communities like the scheduled tribes. The rationale given for such a move is also questionable.

This document also proposes to implement a national repository of high quality resources on foundational literacy and numeracy on the Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) to serve as aids to teachers and help bridge any language barriers that may exist between teachers and students. As mentioned earlier, at present, many of the tribal students are unable to afford smart phones due to the economic situation of their parents. Parents from middle class families can afford to provide their children with smart phones to improve their foundational literacy and numeracy through DIKSHA. In this circumstance, tribal students may be isolated from education, since their parents are unable to provide the same privilege.

The NEP 2020 also reinstates the much criticised three language formula proposed by the draft new education policy in June 2020. It requests students from non-Hindi states to study Hindi and English apart from the regional languages. Students who wish to change one or more of the three languages they are studying may do so in Grade 6 or 7, as long as they can demonstrate basic proficiency in three languages by the end of secondary school. There is no specific mention about including indigenous tribal languages in the curriculum. In such a scenario, it will be difficult for such languages to get attention in the state level curriculum because most of the state governments would cite 'expense' and 'non-availability of the qualified teachers from the communities'. As Krishna Kumar says, "the school system is forged ensure total compliance, no matter how vast the system became diverse remained the demand served by it. Decentralisation was routinely favoured, but it did not touch the core aspects of education as a system" (Kumar, 2020). The NEP, 2020 warrants further evaluations especially on its implications

in the fiercely dysfunctional education system that exists in the most backward districts like Mayurbhanj. The NEP, 2020 needs further scrutiny and corrections especially in the context of the on-going pandemic especially in the context of over 80 per cent of the students studying government schools in five states—Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh—said the school did not deliver online lessons during the Covid 19 lockdown (Oxfam India, 2020).

8. Conclusion

The foregoing discussions show deep-rooted issues and dilemmas associated with the education of the most vulnerable tribal communities in the country. The dropout rate is disproportionately high for the secondary level (within the age group of 15-16) in comparison to the primary level (within the age group of 6-14 years). Many schemes have been introduced to improve the enrolment at the primary level, but such efforts are yet to be imagined for the secondary level student. Household characteristics like parental education, parental occupation, and distance of school are the key parameters influencing the educational attainment of the most vulnerable tribal communities. For many years, these parameters have been often overlooked while studying the dilemmas of tribal education at the regional level. The outbreak of an unprecedented pandemic has storm-tossed the livelihood of the tribal communities. Ironically, the much-expected NEP, 2020 does not acknowledge the existence of this crisis, nor does it suggest concrete steps to address it. More residential schools should be established in each district and be extended up to the higher secondary level in tribal areas by inculcating new imaginative practices adopted by other states to curb the dropout rates. It is appropriate to appoint more teachers, especially female, from a tribal background. At present, the policy per se is silent about these practical solutions.

A two-fold strategy may be adopted to address these concerns. Firstly, to enhance financial investments by imbibing success stories

from other states like Kerala and Himachal Pradesh. Secondly, to entrust relative autonomy or devolution of power to the government school administration and the PTAs to address the concerns regarding school functioning, enrolment, and drop-out, along with substantial financial allocation. It is pertinent to implement corrective measures to curb irregularities associated with teacher transfers—one of the major issues regarding the teaching quality—by imbibing strategies from other states. Therefore, the state needs to enhance policy implementation and recognize the significance of tribe-specific policy because it is clear from the study that vulnerable communities like Kolhas are more susceptible to dropout from school than other communities. The scenario requires tribe-specific education programs beyond *Ashram* Schools. Moreover, issues associated with secondary education have to be specifically targeted. Therefore, it is pertinent to address or reform the core (existing education policy) and peripheral (associated with vulnerable communities) issues together. These issues will take us into the rough terrains where no easy stopgap solutions are possible but only be possible through an authentic reform of the existing regimes.

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Appendices

Appendix No. 1 Distribution of children at Primary level according to their Father Education

Father Education	Munda	Kolha	Santal	Total
No Schooling	56 (40%)	119 (47%)	50 (37%)	225(43%)
Lower Primary	17 (12%)	67 (27%)	17 (13%)	101 (19%)
Upper Primary	18 (13%)	53 (21%)	22 (16%)	93 (18%)
Secondary	30 (21%)	12 (5%)	20 (15%)	62 (12%)
Higher Secondary	13 (9%)		10 (7%)	23 (4%)
Graduation	6 (4%)		14 (10%)	20 (4%)
Post-Graduation			1 (1%)	1 (0.2%)
Total	140	251	134	525
Distribution of children at Secondary level according to their Father Education				
Father Education	Munda	Kolha	Santal	Total
No Schooling	12 (50%)	12 (5%)	15 (50%)	39 (44%)
Lower Primary	3 (13%)	7 (21%)	3(10%)	13 (15%)
Upper Primary	3 (12%)	11(32%)	4 (13%)	18 (20%)
Secondary	4 (17%)	3(9%)	3 (10%)	10 (11%)
Higher Secondary	1(4%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	3 (3%)
Graduation	1(4%)		4 (13%)	5 (6%)
Total	24	34	30	8

Source: Household Survey: 2017

Appendix No. 2 Distribution of children at Primary level according to their Mother Education

Moher Education	Munda	Kolha	Santal	Total
No schooling	69 (49%)	202 (80%)	70 (52%)	341 (65%)
Lower Primary	32 (23%)	31 (12%)	22 (16%)	85 (16%)
Upper Primary	16 (11%)	15 (6%)	23 (17%)	54 (10%)
Secondary	20 (14%)	3 (1%)	11 (8%)	34 (7%)
Higher Secondary	3 (2%)		4(3%)	7(1%)
Graduation			3(2%)	3(1%)
Post-Graduation			1(0.7)	1(0.2)
Total	140	251	134	525
Distribution of children at Secondary level according to their Mother Education				
Mother Education	Munda	Kolha	Santal	Total
No Schooling	14 (58%)	22 (65%)	20 (67%)	56 (63%)
Lower Primary	4 (17%)	6 (18%)	4 (13%)	14 (16%)
Upper Primary	4 (17%)	5 (15%)	3 (10%)	12 (14%)
Secondary	2 (8%)	1 (3%)	2 (7%)	5 (6%)
Higher Secondary			1 (3%)	1 (1%)
Total	24	34	30	88

Source: Household Survey: 2017

Appendix No. 3 Distribution of children at Primary Level according to their Father Occupation

Occupation of Father	Munda	Kolha	Santal	Total
Daily Labour	119 (85%)	239 (95%)	56 (42%)	414 (79%)
Farmer	2 (1%)	2 (1%)	57 (42%)	61 (12%)
Peon/Watch man			1 (1%)	1 (0.2%)
Carpenter/Small business	14 (10%)	10 (4%)	14 (10%)	38 (7%)
Clerical Occupation	3 (2%)		1 (1%)	4 (1%)
Civil Servant			4 (3%)	4 (1%)
Defence Servant	2 (1%)			2 (0.4%)
Lecture			1 (1%)	1 (0.2%)
Total	140	251	134	525
Distribution of children at Secondary Level according to their Father Occupation				
Occupation of Father	Munda	Kolha	Santal	Total
Daily Labour	20 (83%)	28 (82%)	10 (33%)	58 (66%)
Farmer	1 (4%)	1 ;(3%)	15 (50%)	17 (19%)
Peon/Watch man			1 (3%)	1 (1%)
Carpenter/Small business	3 (12%)	5 (15%)	2 (7%)	10 (11%)
Civil Servant			2 (7%)	2 (2%)
Total	24	34	30	88

Source: Household Survey: 2017

Appendix No. 4 Distribution of children at Primary Level according to their Mother Occupation

Occupation of Mother	Munda	Kolha	Santal	Total
Daily Labour	122 (87%)	239 (95%)	53 (40%)	414 (79)
Farmer	11 (8%)	12 (55%)	71 (53)	94 (18%)
Peon			1 (1%)	1 (0.2%)
Teacher in Government School	2 (1%)			2 (0.4%)
Domestic Duties	5 (4%)		8 (6%)	13(2%)
Lecturer			1 (1%)	1 (0.2%)
Total	140	251	134	525
Distribution of children at Secondary Level according to their Mother Occupation				
Occupation of Mother	Munda	Kolha	Santal	Total
Daily Labour	20 (83%)	28 (82%)	9 (39%)	57 (65)
Farmer	4(17%)	6 (18%)	18 (60%)	28 (32%)
Domestic Duties			3 (10%)	3 (3%)
Total	24	34	30	88

Source: Household Survey: 2017

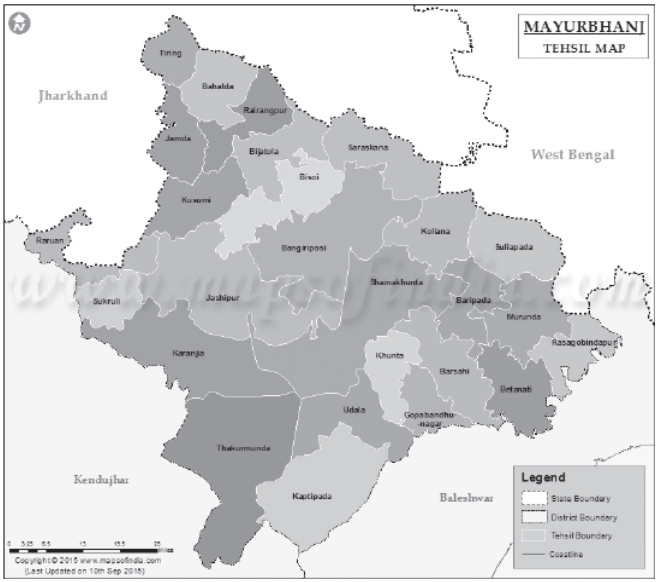
Appendix No.5 Distribution of children at Primary Level according to the Distance of school from their habitation

Distance of School	Munda	Kolha	Santal	Total
0-2km	97 (69%)	156 (62%)	90 (67%)	343 (66%)
>2 to 5 km	20(14%)	75 (30%)	28 (21%)	123 (23%)
>5 km	23 (16%)	20 (8%)	16 (125)	59 (11%)
Total	140	251	134	525
Distribution of children at Secondary Level according to the Distance of school from their habitation				
Distance of school	Munda	Kolha	Santal	Total
0-2km	10 (425)	6 (18%)	12 (40%)	28 (32%)
>2 to 5 km	6 (25%)	19 (56%)	15 (50%)	40 (45%)
>5 km	8 (33%)	9 (26%)	3 (10%)	20 (23%)
Total	24	34	30	88

Source: Household Survey: 2017

Appendix No.6

Study Area



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