

LITERACY RATE AND GENDER ISSUES: A STUDY AMONG THE TRIBES OF NORTH BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Education is the key measurement of development and growth in any country as well as in an individual life. In India, we have seen a massive growth in education sector due to its emphasis on education and the policies and schemes that have been implemented for the development of this sector. Yet, when we look at the literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes(STs) in India, who were mainly marginalized communities in the past, the growth in literacy rate is not satisfactory compared to the rest of the country's population. The present study attempts to find out the current scenario of tribal literacy rate in Alipurduar district of West Bengal along with the gender gap present in literacy rate. It will also seek to find out the reason behind this scenario and suggest some measures which could be adopted in future policy making.

Keywords: Literacy rate, Scheduled Tribes (STs), Education, Gender gap

INTRODUCTION

In India, due to the sustained and concerted efforts by Indian government, there is an impressive growth in elementary school enrolment during the past years. It happened mainly because of governments' successful implementation of programmes, namely DPEP (District Primary Education Programme) and *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*. According to the 2011 census report, West Bengal has total population of 91,276,115 out of which 52,96,953 are tribal people. The total literacy rate of West Bengal as per 2011 census, is 76.26% and the same rate among tribes is 57.9% which is far below the overall literacy of the state. Among them, the male tribal literacy is 68.2% and female is 47.7%, which is even lower. This data clearly suggests that there is a lower literacy rate among tribals in the state of West Bengal and this rate is even lower in case of female.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Looking at the history of the tribes in India it has been said that what distinguished tribes from non-tribes, is that they lived in isolation from the dominant community which was one of the

reason why they were left out in the welfare policies of the state. Hence, after independence, the state has been trying to integrate them into the larger society through various policies for protecting and promoting their interests and welfare. On account of these policies and also due to measures initiated by voluntary associations, tribal societies have undergone transformations. These are visible in all directions, which are encouraging as well as depressing.

In case of education, though several measures have been taken by the Indian government for tribal education, their literacy rate still remains lower than the country's average literacy rate. And what is more striking is the rate of female literacy, which is considerably low against the general tribal literacy rate. Xaxa (2011), points out that the medium of instruction in educational institutions is the reason behind low enrolment of tribes in higher education. Tribes are incorporated into the dominant community of the region through the medium of modern education. There was/is nothing wrong per se in this but, this is done at the cost of the tribal language. In North Bengal too, as Sen (2011) states "although the Left Front Government has recognized OLCHIKI as a language of the Santhal community, it has not been introduced as a medium of instruction till date. There is a high demand in the Terai- Duars area for establishment for more Hindi medium schools and Sadari language as the medium of instruction." Roy (2005) says that the state sponsored development programmes, embedded with ideology of modernism are always worked out at the top of political hierarchy and is often imposed on the tribes, without caring for what they want. Also the curriculum that the education system follows is not tribal friendly which is why they loose their interest in education at an early stage. Other reasons may be embedded in the tribal culture itself as Kalgi(2008) says that the self- sufficient practice of subsistence in tribal communities, priority of education in tribal culture, viewing education for future monetary returns, patriarchal society etc. is the reason behind lower enrolment. Shah(79) in his article says that the attitudes of tribal people towards education are governed by the idea of economic returns which is the reason of high dropouts due to poverty among the tribals.

The UN permanent forum on Indigenous people says that, too often, education systems do not respect indigenous peoples' diverse cultures. There are too few teachers who speak their languages and their schools often lack basic materials. Educational materials that provide accurate and fair information on indigenous peoples and their ways of life are particularly rare. Despite the numerous international instruments that proclaim universal rights to education, indigenous peoples do not fully enjoy these rights, and an education gap between indigenous peoples and the rest of the population remains critical, worldwide. Ethnic and cultural discrimination at schools are major obstacles to equal access to education, causing poor performance and higher dropout rates. Indigenous girls, in particular, experience difficult problems related to unfriendly school environments, gender discrimination, school based violence and sometimes sexual abuse, all of which contribute to high dropout rates.

OBJECTIVES

The study aims to find out the current scenario of literacy among the tribal population in Alipurduar District of Dooars area of North Bengal along with the gendering gap in education. It will also aim to find out the reasons responsible for this low enrolment in education and its ratio among male and female and suggest some steps for future policy making.

AREA OF STUDY

The field chosen for this study is Alipurduar District in the Dooars area of West Bengal. It was earlier a subdivision of Jalpaiguri district before its emergence as the 20th district of West Bengal on 25 June 2014. It consists of Alipurduar municipality and six community development blocks which are Alipurduar-I, Alipurduar-II, Madarihat-Birpara, Kalchini Kumargram and Falakata. The district has a large concentration of tribal population namely Rabha, Mech, Santhals, Madasia, Garo, Toto and Oraons. According to Census of India, 2011, Alipurduar district has a total of 3,81,616 ST population among which 50.22% are male and 49.78% are female. The proportion of rural ST population is 95.33% and urban ST population is 4.67% to total ST population of the district.

The study is based on secondary data. The data for analysis is collected from District Census Handbook of Jalpaiguri district, 2011 and Census Report 2011. Several Articles and books have been consulted on the topic to gain an overall idea about the present scenario of tribal literacy rate and gender gap among them.

Figure 1. Map of Alipurduar District



Table 1. Demography of Alipurduar district (2011 census)

Demography (2011 Census)

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Total population | 15,01,983 |
| Total male population | 7,70,905 |
| Total female population | 7,31,078 |
| Sex ratio | 948/1000 |
| Population Density | 539/Sq.km |
| Percentage of Literate person(total) | 73.25% |
| Percentage of male literate person | 79.95% |
| Percentage of female literate person | 66.23% |
| Percentage of literate ST population (total) | 60.38% |
| Percentage of literate ST population(male) | 68.88% |
| Percentage of literate ST population(female) | 51.84% |

Source: District Census Handbook of Jalpaiguri & Census of India, 2011

The male and female literacy rate among STs of Alipurduar district is 68.88% and 51.84% respectively. Hence from the above Table 1, it is clear that there is a gender gap in case of tribal literacy in the study area.

Table 2. Comparative analysis of Block wise ST population and literacy rate in Alipurduar District

| Blocks | Total population | Population (ST) | Total Literacy Rate (%) | ST Literacy Rate (%) |
|-------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Alipurduar I | 206151 | 36605 | 78.19 | 63.38 |
| Alipurduar II | 196909 | 40245 | 75.76 | 64.04 |
| Madarihat-Birpara | 202068 | 78314 | 67.77 | 58 |
| Kalchini | 279684 | 192960 | 68.96 | 61.62 |
| Kumargram | 199615 | 63795 | 72.42 | 59.56 |
| Falakata | 290722 | 46293 | 72.64 | 55.86 |

Source: 2011 census: CD Block wise Primary Census Abstract Data & District Census Handbook of Jalpaiguri, 2011

Table 2 shows a comparative analysis of block wise ST population and literacy rate among them. From this table it is clear that the literacy rate is comparatively higher in urban areas of the district (Alipurduar I and Alipurduar II) which also has a lower ST population than other blocks. Whereas in the other three blocks which is mostly rural in nature (Madarihat-Birpara, Kalchini, Kumargram) which has higher ST population, the literacy rate is lower. Falakata, on the other hand has lower ST population as well as low literacy rate.

Table 3: Block wise gender gap among STs in literacy rate in Alipurduar District

| Blocks | Literacy Rate (%) Male | Literacy Rate (%) Female | Gender gap (%) |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Alipurduar I | 71.57 | 54.79 | 16.78 |
| Alipurduar II | 70.56 | 57.39 | 13.17 |
| Madarihat- Birpara | 67.84 | 49.12 | 18.72 |
| Kalchini | 70.57 | 52.84 | 17.73 |
| Kumargram | 67.25 | 51.69 | 15.56 |
| Falakata | 64.7 | 46.76 | 17.94 |

Source: 2011 census: CD Block wise Primary Census Abstract Data & District Census Handbook of Jalpaiguri, 2011

Table 3 shows the block wise gender gap among STs in literacy rate. This Table clearly shows that in all the blocks female literacy of STs is lower than that of male with Madarihat-Birpara having the highest gender gap (18.72%) and Alipurduar II having the lowest (13.17%)

REASONS

Tribal students frequently find that the education they are offered by the state promotes individualism and a competitive atmosphere, rather than communal ways of life and cooperation which forms the ethos of their culture. They are not taught relevant survival and work skills suitable for their economies, and they often return to their communities with a formal education that is irrelevant or unsuitable for their needs.

The Dooars Terai area is surrounded by tea gardens and the majority of tribal population are Sadari speaking and are pass outs from Hindi medium schools but in colleges they either have to take up Bengali, English as their medium of instruction since the majority of resources are available only in these languages for higher studies. This ultimately results in poor outcome in their progress reports and hence dropouts. There is a high demand for Sadari Olchiki, Bodo medium schools in the region but very few books are available and are translated to these regional languages. Therefore the question remains, even if these regional languages are introduced at the school level as the medium of instruction, what happens at the college or university level?

There is huge son preference in Indian society and this is true even among the tribal communities. The reason behind such mindset is the power relation present in the society and education too operates within this context. Therefore, we see more girls dropping out of schools and therefore the gender gap in literacy rate. The school going girls are mostly kept home to care for domestic needs and the younger, when the parents go for work who are mostly daily wage workers. Whereas the boys are viewed as a future breadwinner and caregiver of the family so education is more important to them. A girl, on the other hand, is seen as a liability, as parents are often pressured to pay dowries when their daughters marry.

CONCLUSION

From the above study it is obvious that the literacy rate among the tribal people is lower than the rest of the population. The infrastructure and the environment to learn in many government schools do not stimulate learning. Also the provisions made for tribal education in schools are not properly distributed and many of them are ignorant about it which is why they lose their interest in study at an early age and seek for job opportunities. Most of their parents are illiterate therefore they cannot guide their children for higher education for a better future. Therefore, special provisions should be made in order to make the educational institutions to be more efficient for providing a healthy environment for studies. Also in tribal concentrated blocks, more provisions should be made for tribal welfare other than the already existing general welfare schemes. The local community participation in policy making is of great importance in such

cases. It can provide the policy makers more precise information on where more expenditure should be made in order to provide quality education and also about the problems faced by the community themselves for access to education. There should be more awareness programs and every educational institution should involve the families of the children. They should also facilitate and support different kinds of learning other than the normal school curriculum in order to make learning more engaging.

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