



TRIBAL'S EDUCATION IN TELANGANA STATE

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines initiatives for greater participation in education by tribal communities in India, arguing that current policy does not effectively enough facilitate greater participation and may, in fact, go against the avowed principle of ensuring greater equity. The article relies on fieldwork-based study to support arguments for the need to be culturally sensitive in making appropriate provisions for the education of scheduled tribes in India. Reasons for high dropout rates and non-enrolment among tribal children are examined and some searching questions are asked about why so many tribal people dislike schools.

Keywords: education, scheduled tribes, schools.

Introduction about Education System

The expectation that top-down state-centric provision can have significant impact on the education of all children in India remains evidently a pipe dream. Kaul (2001: 155) argues that '[t]he vast maze of literature on primary education in India has identified various reasons for its abysmal state'. A more recent expert assessment identifies significant educational deficits and expresses grave doubts whether India will be able to take advantage of its demographic dividend. Altbach and Jayaram (2012: 93), stating that 'the youth segment of the population is projected to peak at 484.86 million in 2030', estimate that India's literacy rate after more than 60 years is around 63 per cent, as compared to 93 per cent in China and castigate India's 'poor education system from bottom to top'. While Article 21-A of the Indian Constitution (1950), added in 2002, now officially guarantees a child's fundamental right to free and compulsory education between the ages of six to fourteen years, local realities remain rather different.

Education, perceived to bring about all-round development and to substantially improve the quality of life of an individual, is an important topic of national development.¹ Elementary education has now rightly been enshrined as a Fundamental right in the Constitution of India. Special focus has been given to the education of various disadvantaged sections of society and education for children from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (SC/ST) has engaged education policy since independence (Mehta & Kapur, 1998: 25). It has been observed, however, that the present education system generally fails to develop the inner personality of pupils. Regarding the role of education in enhancing the quality of life of individuals in general and of tribals in particular, we see important early disagreements over policy and approaches between Gandhi and Ambedkar. While Mahatma Gandhi laid stress on an educational model which focused on the overall development of the human personality within the context of the family, Dr B.R. Ambedkar advised a different strategy, as cited by Parthasarthy (1992: 101):

I think that the means that have to be adopted for the purpose of bringing these people up are not that we should have Primary Schools and Secondary Schools for these people. I would suggest that schools should be opened for them in their own locality or some central place. It would be



better if we will provide them food, shelter and education in that very place away from their parents.

The Government of India initiated several schemes to improve the overall development of the nation, with special efforts made to implant reservations for tribal development. While the Indian government realised the importance of education and fulfilled its promises (Kakali, 2004: 1), given the size of the nation and the immense diversity of its people and their educational needs, bottlenecks of development remain present also in primary education. Some problems relate to the mind-boggling extent of diversity. Within the unique features of the Indian secular national context, we find prominently what is often called 'unity in diversity', referring not only in terms of religion to 'its multi-value character' (Bhargava, 2010: 95). India is without doubt significant for its multiple cultures, traditions, religions and languages.

Pre and Post-Independence Era

During the pre-British period, tribal communities in India remained fully or partially isolated from others and remained largely backward, suffering from poverty, malnutrition, disease, exploitation and ignorance to varying degrees. While Ghurye (1980 [1963]: 47) referred to earlier reports that some tribals were now better educated, mainly through contacts with Hindus and adopting Hindu patterns of life, including claims to Kshatriya origins, for the majority of tribal populations this would not be the case. The colonial government paid little attention to tribal development, because it mainly aimed at maintenance of law and order and revenue collection. In 1935 the colonial government introduced the Excluded and Partially Excluded Area Act to make non-applicable the legislations of provisional governments to tribal areas (Kakali, 2004: 24). This further widened the socio-economic gulf between tribal and non-tribal communities. Significantly, Ghurye (1980 [1963]: 107) observes rather subtly that in many Scheduled Districts of British India the exploitation of the natural resources of the region by British commercial interests 'creates a presumption that all that was being done was not necessarily in the sole interests of these people or even of the general community'. In other words, uneducated tribals would be a useful source of cheap labour to extract precious natural resources. Nobody would really be interested in their education.

During the post-colonial period, it was decided to put all communities hitherto recognized as aboriginals in separate Schedules of the Constitution of India (1950), where they are enlisted in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. The Fifth Schedule contains provisions regarding administration and control of scheduled areas and STs in states other than the north-eastern states, whereas the Sixth Schedule covers the north-eastern states. Thus, welfare and development of the tribal communities have been part of the national goal and have become a special responsibility mainly of the various state governments. Regarding educational institutions, this meant planning, especially for elementary, secondary and higher secondary education.

The Indian Constitution assigns special status to STs, traditionally referred to as *adivasis* (native people), aboriginals, *vanvasis* (forest dwellers) and indigenous people, who constitute about 8.2 per cent of India's population according to the 2001 Census. There are 705 STs living in different parts of the country (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2013: 1). Realizing that STs are the



most deprived and marginalized groups when it comes to education, a number of programmes were initiated after Independence. Elementary education has been a priority area in the tribal sub-plans from the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974–79) onwards (Planning Commission, 1974: 25). Education of ST children is considered important not only because of constitutional obligations but also because of its crucial impact on the total development of tribal communities (Khullar, 2006: 14). After 1999 priority for tribal education became a major challenge since providing education to tribal children often involves setting up schooling facilities in small, scattered and remote tribal habitations. Most of the ST population lives in sparsely populated habitations in the interior parts of India and in the north-east, spread over often inaccessible hilly and forested areas. Nearly 22 per cent of tribal habitations have less than 100 persons, while more than 40 per cent have populations of 100 to 300. Most of the rest have populations of 300–500 (Khullar, 2006: 14).

According to a report by the National Council of Education Research and Training (1993), 78 per cent of the tribal population and 56 per cent of tribal habitations have been provided primary schools within the habitation, while 11 per cent of tribal populations and 20 per cent of habitations have schools within less than 1 km radius. A more recent report (Government of India, 2006: 232) states that about 65 per cent of rural habitations in India, with 86 per cent of the total rural population, have primary schools within a distance of half a kilometre as against 56 per cent of tribal habitations with 79 per cent of the tribal population. This would appear to indicate very little progress during this period and suggests more need for continuous monitoring and activist engagement. According to the same source, Mizoram and Gujarat claim the highest percentage of tribal populations and habitations covered by primary schools within the locality, with up to 95 per cent of their tribal population and 85–95 per cent of the tribal habitation in these two states provided with schooling facility within the habitation.

Universalisation of Education

After independence, education of people became the responsibility of the states while the central government's only obligation was to coordinate technical and higher education. A commission under the chairmanship of Dr D.S. Kothari was set up in 1964 (Parthasarthy, 1992: 94), and free and compulsory education was first mooted by this commission. Later, the idea was passionately argued for by former Union Education Minister M.C. Chagla and in 1976, the 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act made education a joint responsibility of the states and the Centre, putting it as a subject into the Concurrent List of the Constitution in the Seventh Schedule. The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1986 and a Revised Programme of Action (POA) of 1992 envisioned that free and compulsory education should be provided for all children up to 14 years before the commencement of the twenty-first century. The Government of India committed itself to spending 6 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education by the year 2000, and half of this was to be spent on providing education at primary level (Ghosh, 2000: 178–9). Looking at various commissions² and the Twenty Years Programme (see Government of India, 1986) of compulsory primary education, especially with regard to their impact on interaction with socio-economic problems among STs, a certain pattern emerges. The policies



formulated by the central government do not have sufficient direct relevance to tribal groups. These ambitious plans and programmes may be common to the entire nation and are part of a national infrastructure, but are often devised in complete isolation from local realities. In some cases, local perceptions may have been accepted in principle and incorporated into the design itself. For example, some schemes for illiteracy eradication, drawn up within an all-India framework, have adapted some services to local needs. To understand what is really going on at ground level, though, fieldwork is essential. Later sections of this article thus focus on fieldwork conducted by the author.

Constitutional safeguards and national policies in India have increasingly focused on human rights concerns and stress universalisation of elementary education. It is reflected in the Constitution (Eighty-Sixth Amendment Act of 2002), which introduced a new sub-article 21-A (Right to Education), providing '[t]he State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine'. While it still leaves a lot of discretion to the state in terms of how to implement such fundamental rights provisions, this more recent additional safeguard reflects that a major goal of the Indian Constitution remains to achieve better social justice. Moreover, under international pressure, the global Millennium Development Goals also expect significant progress to happen in India by 2015. In addition, among the Directive Principles of State Policy too, Article 46 (Promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections) of the Indian Constitution (1950) proclaims that '[t]he State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation'.

Parental Aspects on Education

The sections below cover first several parental aspects relating to education and later focus more on the children's perspectives. Parents are the backbone of the education system. Their awareness and understanding of the importance of education impact significantly on the educational participation rate and progress of their children. This study has included the parents' perceptions first in order to allow reflection on the link between the parents' perception and views in regard to the education system and the system's components itself. Parental perceptions also depend, as we shall illustrate, upon their socio-economic and education status. All the tables and figures are based on the author's fieldwork and are produced by the author.

Table 1 and Figure 1 show that the basic source of local tribals' income is labour and agriculture. While 56.67 per cent of the tribal respondents are engaged in wage labour, mostly in agriculture, only a few of them are engaged in agriculture with 2 or 3 acres of land, which does not give sufficient income to sustain their families. Because they do not have sufficient land, many people are forced to depend on additional wage labour. As there is not work every day, such type of labour needs to be classified as occasional labour. This has resulted in social inequality within tribal communities and uneven distribution of wealth. Labour is overwhelmingly linked with the primary sector and most tribals depend on subsistence agriculture, while a notable 10.00 per cent

of the respondents are in government service, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, which reflect some positive evidence of affirmative action policies. In every case, these people were the first generation of the family to be employed in government services.

Table 1 Parental Occupation

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>% of Respondents</i>
1	Wage Labour	51	56.67
2	Agriculture	30	33.33
3	Service	9	10.00
Total		90	100

Student's Perspectives

This section reflects the students' perceptions of their participation in education, a view doubly from below, as tribals and as children. From a child-centric perspective, they should be seen as big stakeholders in the education system. Tables below

Frequency of School Attendance in the Last Three Months

<i>Sl. No</i>	<i>Attendance</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	Regular	37	41.11
2	Somewhat regular	16	17.78
3	Not regular	37	41.11
4	Total	90	100

Reasons for not Being Regular in Class

<i>Sl. No</i>	<i>Reason for Irregularity</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
1	No interest by parents	18	20
2	Wage labour	10	11.11



3	Attitude of teacher/staff/student	6	6.67
4	Domestic work	12	13.34
5	No interest	2	2.22
6	Health problems	2	2.22
7	Festival or rituals	1	1.11
8	Bad season or heavy rain	2	2.22
9	Not applicable	37	41.11
10	Total	90	100

Difficulty in Understanding Classroom Teaching

Sl. No.	Difficulty in Classroom Teaching	Number of respondents	Percentage
1	Yes	76	84.45
2	No	14	15.55
3	Total	90	100

record and explore the fieldwork results of pupils' frequency of school attendance, their reasons for not being regular in class and their difficulties in following the instructions, before Table deals with some language issues.

Regular attendance in school is an important condition to acquire a meaningful degree of education, since education is a continuous process, where the previous lessons are revised, doubts cleared and new ideas introduced. Pupils who miss out on classes will not be aware of what was taught in the class during their absence. Consequently, returning to school after some gap, such children will find it difficult to cope. Table 9 shows that the attendance of the respondents is largely irregular. An equal percentage of students reported regular as well as

irregular attendance in class, whereas 17.78 per cent were somewhat regular. Some specific reasons for such high degrees of absence and irregularity are discussed below.

For education to be meaningful, cooperation and supervision of parents seem to be an essential element (Matthey-Prakash, 2016). Parents should show an interest in their children getting educated and motivating them to study. However, many respondents (20 per cent) put the blame on their parents. The second frequent reason for absence, still closely related, is domestic work (13.34 per cent). Respondents of both categories preferred not to be absent from school and the majority of these respondents were female. They are kept busy with housework and taking care of siblings. This shows that many children, in fact about a third, appear to be prevented from school attendance against their will by expectations on the part of their parents that they should contribute to the family income rather than attend school. In addition, the 11.11 per cent of respondents, in whose view wage labour is a basic hurdle in attending school regularly, most probably suffered similar predicaments of conflicting commitments, or they might themselves agree that contributing to the family income is important. Notably, together, these are 40 per cent of all tribal children in this sample whose educational progression suffers because of lack of parental interest and commitment or due to economic constraints. Only 6.67 per cent of tribal students expressed the opinion that the attitude of the teacher is their basic reason for not attending school while other reasons given are minor. Thirty-seven student respondents, listed in column 9 of Table 10, were regular students so the question of irregular attendance was not applicable to them.

A significant percentage of students reported facing difficulties or problems in classroom teaching. According to them, they are unable to follow the teaching method of the teacher or the classroom teaching. This is basically due to the fact that the language of teaching is English or Telugu, while the tribal students have been used to following their tribal language since childhood. At primary school level, to opt for Telugu or English as the medium of instruction is clearly creating great difficulties for the students and the teaching of mathematics was also found difficult for students to understand. Teachers were not able to clear up doubts or give special attention to weak students, mainly due to their heavy workload, as these two teachers are teaching five classes in the school and informal interaction with them confirmed that they felt overwhelmed.

Conclusions

The research presented here documents that even though impressive educational policies have been formulated by central and state governments, many tribal children in this field study are not completing even primary education. They are dropping out of schools and their attendance levels are defective. Looking for reasons that confirm earlier views of an abysmal state (Kaul, 2001: 155) also for this field study, we can draw some further inferences from the field research and the above tables with evidence from this particular hamlet. Among the main reasons for low school involvement of tribal children is clearly that the majority seem to be expected or even forced to work in the fields or the home. Socio-economic precariousness, partly connected to alcohol consumption, thus appears as the main factor. Differential parental attitudes towards



education for boys and girls, respectively, do further damage. Together with preference for early marriage and female focus on household work, but also due to negative implications of employment-related seasonal and occasional migration of the parents, non-enrolment and high drop-out rates remain a strong feature. This reflects and in turn generates low awareness among respondents about the beneficial role of schooling for children and continuing low levels of literacy in this tribal community scenario.

It was found in several case studies conducted by the author in this hamlet, not included here because of space constraints, that economically enterprising parents may have found a viable way to rear goats and sheep or sell milk, for example, but rely heavily on family labour, including child labour. Parents then have to make strategic decisions whether to facilitate the education of their children or not. In line with the fieldwork results reported in the Tables given above, it was found on the basis of participant observation that some parents ensured that their children went to school while others did not. Agency at the family level remains a key factor to safeguard the best interests of the young child. Even when immediate survival was not at issue and there was no threat of starvation (Dhar, 2014), the child may not be sent to school.

The Constitution of India has guaranteed the right for compulsory education for children between the ages of 6–14 years, but the Constitution is not the law of every home. At the rural family level, socio-economic and cultural factors clearly have vital impact on continuing patterns of less literacy, perhaps specifically among tribal communities. Government policies are concerned about statistics, are focused on achieving universalisation of elementary education and seek to eradicate illiteracy. Lack of implementation of such policies in a manner that suits the respective local conditions remains a main reason for high dropout rates in primary schools at hamlet level. Poor parental socio-economic conditions and lack of awareness about the long-term benefits of schooling remain obstacles, particularly explaining the higher dropout rate among girls. Many field observations also reflect that happy children learn better than those who lead unhappy lives and are subject to violence and cruelty. While more research needs to be done on why disenchantment with education (see Kaul, 2001: 158) runs so high, also among pupils themselves, the conclusion reached by this field study is that there is still a vicious circle in operation, as shown in Figure 3.

A few more words on happiness, or rather lack of it, may be added here. A good education system should contribute significantly to people's personal and collective happiness. During fieldwork it was found that many tribal people dislike schools. This unsystematic though strongly present observation increased the researcher's.

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