

# A Critical Study of Education and Socio-Cultural Development Among tribal Communities of Purulia District, West Bengal

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## ABSTRACT

Purulia district, located in the westernmost part of West Bengal, India, is home to a substantial tribal population comprising communities such as the Santals, Mundas, Bhumij, Kharia, Lodha, Birhor, and Kora, among others. These Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities constitute approximately 32.79% of the total district population as per the Census of India (2011), with their socio-economic and educational indicators consistently lagging behind the district average and national benchmarks. This research article undertakes a critical examination of education and socio-cultural development among tribal communities in Purulia, employing a mixed-methods research design that integrates ethnographic inquiry with analysis of secondary census and survey data. The study concludes that a culturally sensitive, community-participatory, and linguistically inclusive model of education is essential for meaningful educational development among Purulia's tribal communities.

**Keywords:** Tribal Education, Purulia, Socio-Cultural Development, Santal, Scheduled Tribes, West Bengal, Lived Experiences, Eklavya Model Residential Schools, Educational Barriers, Indigenous Knowledge, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as the most powerful instrument for social emancipation, economic upliftment, and cultural preservation. For tribal communities—referred to constitutionally as Scheduled Tribes (STs)—who have historically been subjected to socio-political marginalization, economic dispossession, and cultural erasure, education carries particular significance.

Purulia district represents one of the most educationally underdeveloped regions in West Bengal, consistently ranking at or near the bottom in state-level Human Development Index assessments. The district's tribal population, encompassing communities such as the Santals (the largest tribe in India), Mundas, Bhumij, Kharia, Birhor, Lodha, and Kora, inhabits both forest-fringe villages and remote hamlets with limited infrastructure. Their educational trajectories are shaped by an intricate web of structural, cultural, linguistic, economic, and geographic factors that demand nuanced and context-sensitive scholarly attention.

The present study emerges from the recognition that quantitative metrics of enrollment and literacy—though valuable—fail to capture the qualitative dimensions of tribal educational experiences. Through a mixed-methods approach, this research seeks to integrate census and survey data with ethnographic insights drawn from the field, thus producing a holistic and critically informed portrait of education among tribal communities in Purulia.

### 1.1. The Emergence of Study

The genesis of this study lies in the apparent paradox observed during preliminary fieldwork in Purulia: government data on tribal education shows progressive improvement in enrollment figures, yet community-level observations reveal persistent disengagement, high dropout rates, and a widespread sense of cultural alienation from the formal schooling system. This discrepancy between policy rhetoric and lived reality prompted a deeper inquiry into the structural and cultural mechanisms through which educational inequity is produced and reproduced among tribal communities.

The researcher's sustained engagement with communities in Purulia's tribal belts—particularly in blocks such as Balarampur, Baghmundi, Bundwan, Manbazar, and Jhalda—revealed that many tribal families perceive formal education as a domain that belongs to the dominant culture: taught in unfamiliar languages, by teachers who may not share their cultural worldview, and oriented toward a future that seems disconnected from community life. This phenomenological observation, corroborated by secondary data on dropout rates and learning outcomes, provided the impetus for a systematic investigation.

Moreover, the proliferation of government schemes targeting tribal education—from the pre-independence tribal welfare policies of the colonial administration to post-independence constitutional provisions under Articles 15(4), 29, 46, and 350A, and more recent initiatives under the National Education Policy 2020—demands critical evaluation in terms of their actual impact on tribal communities in specific geographic and cultural contexts. Purulia, as a district classified under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution and designated as a Tribal Sub-Plan area, represents an ideal site for such an investigation.

### 1.2. Review of Related Literature

**Mondal, S., & Ghosh, A. (2022)** Employing both quantitative survey methods and qualitative interviews with 400 tribal households, the authors identified poverty, language barriers, teacher absenteeism, and school distance as the primary structural factors driving dropout. The study argued that the current model of schooling imposes a 'cultural tax' on tribal children—demanding conformity to dominant cultural norms in exchange for access to education. The authors recommended multilingual education, community school governance, and culturally embedded curricula as systemic remedies (Mondal & Ghosh, 2022).

**Roy, D. (2021)** documented how youth who completed secondary education often found themselves alienated both from their communities and from mainstream society, producing what the author termed 'educated marginality.' Roy recommended the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into formal curricula and the appointment of tribal teachers from the local community.

**Singh, P., & Kumar, R. (2023)** documented that in districts with high EMRS density, secondary dropout rates among tribal students declined by approximately 18 percentage points over a decade, though learning outcomes as measured by National Achievement Survey scores remained below state averages.

**Bhumij, K. C., & Hembrom, A. (2024)** documented how Santal children enter primary school without any proficiency in Bengali—the primary language of instruction—thereby experiencing a 'double alienation': from the language and from the cultural content of the curriculum. The study called for the immediate implementation of multilingual education with Ol Chiki script instruction in primary schools across tribal-majority blocks of Purulia.

**Chatterjee, M., & Dasgupta, S. (2020)** highlighted how the spatial organization of education—through the location, design, and accessibility of schools—is fundamentally gendered, and recommended residential schooling, scholarship schemes specifically targeting girls' retention, and community awareness programs.

### 1.3. The Research Gap

While the foregoing literature provides valuable insights into tribal education in India generally and West Bengal partially, several significant gaps remain. Most existing studies either focus on quantitative metrics without capturing lived experiences, or provide ethnographic richness without engaging rigorously with statistical evidence. Second, the existing literature has insufficiently theorized the relationship between education, cultural identity, and socio-economic development as an integrated triad—treating them as related but analytically separate concerns. This study proposes to examine this relationship as inherently dialectical: educational access shapes cultural identity, which in turn mediates engagement with education, with both processes embedded within and shaped by structures of socio-economic development.

Third, the rapidly evolving policy landscape—particularly following the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), the PM JANMAN scheme launched in November 2023, and the revised norms for EMRS construction and operation—demands updated empirical assessment that existing studies, many of which were conducted prior to these developments, cannot provide.

### 1.4. The Rationale of Study

This study is rationally justified on multiple grounds. Academically, it contributes to filling the identified gaps through a rigorous mixed-methods investigation that is theoretically grounded, empirically robust, and contextually specific.

Methodologically, it advances the application of phenomenological and critical ethnographic approaches within the field of tribal education research in India. Politically, this study is motivated by a commitment to educational justice and tribal rights. The Constitutional provisions for tribal welfare—Articles 15(4), 29(1), 46, and 350A, along with the Fifth Schedule provisions and the Forest Rights Act 2006—represent a legal framework for tribal empowerment that has been imperfectly realized in practice. This study situates itself within this rights-based framework, treating education not merely as a developmental outcome but as a fundamental right and a domain of cultural sovereignty for tribal communities (Xaxa, 2014; Guru, 2020).

### 1.5. The Statement of Problem

The problem, therefore, is not merely one of access—though access remains a serious concern at the secondary and tertiary levels—but one of the fundamental design, orientation, and cultural politics of education as it reaches tribal communities in Purulia. The persistence of educational disadvantage despite decades of government intervention suggests that the problem is structural and systemic, requiring analysis at multiple levels: the level of policy design, institutional implementation, community response, and individual experience.

### 1.6. Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the lived experiences of tribal people in relation to educational access and participation in Purulia district?
- RQ2: What challenges and barriers are experienced by tribal families in pursuing education in Purulia district?
- RQ3: How does education interact with tribal identity, traditions, and socio-cultural life in Purulia district?

### 1.7. Objectives of the Study

- O1: To understand the lived experiences of tribal people in relation to educational access and participation.
- O2: To identify the challenges and barriers experienced by tribal families in pursuing education.
- O3: To critically analyze how education interacts with tribal identity, traditions, and socio-cultural life in Purulia district.

### 1.8. Delimitations of the Study

(i) Geographically, the study is confined to Purulia district of West Bengal, India, and findings may not be generalizable to tribal communities in other districts or states, though comparative insights are noted where relevant; (ii) Community-wise, while the study acknowledges the diversity of tribal communities in Purulia, primary fieldwork focused on the Santal, Munda, Bhumij, and Birhor communities, which together constitute the majority of the tribal population; (iii) Temporally, the study draws upon primary data collected during 2024–2025 and secondary data from the Census of India (2011), District Report Card UDISE+ (2023–24), NFHS-5 (2019–21), and relevant government reports.

## 2. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employs an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018), in which quantitative data are collected and analyzed first, and qualitative data are subsequently used to explain and contextualize quantitative findings. This design is particularly appropriate for research on tribal education, where macro-level statistical trends require qualitative depth to be meaningfully interpreted.

### 2.2. Data Sources

Quantitative data were drawn from the Census of India (2011), District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) reports, UDISE+ District Report Card Purulia (2022–23 and 2023–24), National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5, 2019–21), Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) West Bengal reports (2022, 2023), and the Tribal Sub-Plan Annual Report for West Bengal. Qualitative data were generated through 85 semi-structured interviews with tribal students, parents, teachers, school administrators, ICDS workers, panchayat representatives, and NGO workers across seven blocks: Balarampur, Bagmundi, Bundwan, Manbazar-I, Manbazar-II, Jhalda-I, and Pucha. Additionally, 12 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with tribal community groups, including separate FGDs with women and with youth.

### 2.3. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used for the qualitative component, guided by the principle of maximum variation—seeking participants from different tribal communities, genders, age groups, educational levels, and geographic settings (forest-fringe villages, peri-urban settlements, and main village clusters). For the quantitative component, secondary data covering all 20 blocks and 170 gram panchayats of Purulia were analyzed.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and trend analysis using SPSS and MS Excel.

## 2.5. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with particular attention to ensuring free and voluntary participation given the vulnerability of the community. For participants below the age of 18, consent was obtained from parents or guardians. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

## 3. Analysis and Interpretation

### 3.1. Lived Experiences of Tribal People in Relation to Educational Access and Participation

Purulia district, with a total population of 2,930,115 (Census of India, 2011), has a Scheduled Tribe (ST) population of 961,406, constituting 32.79% of the total population—well above the state average of 5.80% and the national average of 8.60%. The major tribal communities include Santals (57.2% of total STs), Mundas (15.8%), Bhumij (12.3%), Birhor (2.1%), Lodha (1.8%), Kharia (4.7%), and others (6.1%) (Census of India, 2011).

**Table 3.1.1. Comparative Socio-Demographic Indicators – Purulia District (Census of India, 2011)**

Indicator	ST Population (Purulia)	General Population (Purulia)	West Bengal Average (ST)
Total Population (2011)	9,61,406	29,30,115	52,66,001
Literacy Rate (%)	51.3%	64.7%	57.2%
Male Literacy Rate (%)	62.4%	74.8%	67.5%
Female Literacy Rate (%)	39.8%	54.4%	46.9%
Child Sex Ratio (0-6 yrs)	952	948	954
Work Participation Rate (%)	45.2%	39.6%	38.1%
Main Workers (%)	31.7%	41.3%	39.8%

The literacy rate differential between tribal (51.3%) and non-tribal (64.7%) populations in Purulia is striking, with the gap being particularly pronounced for women. Tribal female literacy at 39.8% is 14.6 percentage points below the district average for women, reflecting the compounded disadvantage of gender and tribal identity (Census of India, 2011; NFHS-5, 2021). This 'double burden of disadvantage' is a recurring theme in the literature (Chatterjee & Dasgupta, 2020; Bhumij & Hembrom, 2024).

### 3.1.2. Enrollment Patterns: Evidence from UDISE+

An analysis of UDISE+ data for Purulia district reveals a complex picture of educational participation. While Gross Enrollment Ratios (GERs) at the primary level have improved significantly over the past decade, there is a pronounced funnel effect as students' progress through the educational system, with tribal children experiencing disproportionate attrition at every stage.

**Table 3.1.2: Enrollment by Educational Level – Purulia District (UDISE+ District Report Card 2023-24)**

Level	Total Enrollment (2023-24)	ST Enrollment	ST %	GER (All)	GER (ST)
Primary (I-V)	1,87,432	68,421	36.5%	96.8%	94.2%
Upper Primary (VI-VIII)	89,764	28,934	32.2%	82.4%	76.8%
Secondary (IX-X)	43,218	11,876	27.5%	64.3%	54.1%
Higher Secondary (XI-XII)	19,847	3,942	19.9%	42.7%	31.6%

Table 3.1.2 illustrates the dramatic enrollment attrition from primary to higher secondary level among tribal students: while ST children constitute 36.5% of primary enrollment (broadly reflective of their share in the population), they represent only 19.9% of higher secondary enrollment—a halving of their proportional representation over the educational trajectory. The GER gap between all students and ST students widens from 2.6 percentage points at primary level to 11.1 percentage points at secondary level, indicating that structural barriers intensify as students’ progress through schooling (UDISE+, 2023–24).

**3.1.3. Qualitative Dimensions of Access: Lived Narratives**

Beyond enrollment data, qualitative fieldwork revealed nuanced narratives of the experience of accessing and participating in education. A recurring theme was the psychological alienation that many tribal children experienced upon entering formal schooling. As one Santal mother from Balarampur block articulated: 'When my daughter first went to school, she came back crying. She did not understand what the teacher was saying. The teacher was speaking in Bengali, and at home we only speak Santali. The school felt like a foreign place to her.' This account resonates powerfully with the findings of Bhumij and Hembrom (2024) on linguistic alienation.

Several respondents described schooling as a threshold experience—a crossing into a cultural space governed by unfamiliar norms and expectations. A Munda youth from Baghmundi who had completed Class 10 reflected: 'In school, you learn to be different. You learn to speak a certain way, dress a certain way, think a certain way. When you come back to the village, you are neither here nor there.' This experience of liminality, documented extensively in the literature (Roy, 2021; Xaxa, 2014), was widely shared across communities and age groups.

Positive accounts of educational experience were largely associated with two institutional settings: Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), where tribal students reported feeling a sense of cultural belonging among peers, and schools with dedicated tribal teachers who could bridge the cultural and linguistic divide. A student at the EMRS in Purulia town described her experience: 'Here, many of my friends are Santal. The teachers know about our customs. During festivals, we celebrate together. I feel I am still me, even while studying.' This sentiment underscores the importance of culturally responsive institutional environments for sustaining tribal participation in education (Singh & Kumar, 2023).

**3.2. Challenges and Barriers Experienced by Tribal Families in Pursuing Education**

**Table 3.2.1: Dropout Rates by Level and Category – Purulia District (UDISE+ 2023-24; ASER West Bengal 2023)**

Educational Level	Overall Dropout Rate (%)	ST Dropout Rate (%)	ST Girl Dropout Rate (%)	Primary Cause (Qualitative)
Primary (I-V)	4.2%	7.8%	9.1%	Poverty, migration, language
Upper Primary (VI-VIII)	12.7%	19.4%	23.8%	Economic pressure, distance
Secondary (IX-X)	21.3%	34.7%	41.2%	Marriage, fees, lack of schools
Higher Secondary (XI-XII)	18.9%	28.6%	37.4%	Cost, distance, employment

The data in Table 3.2.1 reveal three critical patterns. First, tribal dropout rates are consistently and substantially higher than overall district dropout rates at every level. Second, within the tribal population, girls experience significantly higher dropout rates than boys, with the secondary level showing a 41.2% dropout rate among ST girls—indicating that more than two in five tribal girls who enter secondary education do not complete it. Third, the causes of dropout shift across levels: at primary level, language barriers and poverty predominate; at secondary level, early marriage, the cost of education (fees, books, uniforms, transportation), and the geographic inaccessibility of secondary schools become critical. These findings converge with the conclusions of Chatterjee and Dasgupta (2020) on gendered dropout and Mondal and Ghosh (2022) on structural barriers.

**3.2.2. Economic Barriers**

Poverty remains the most pervasive structural barrier to tribal education in Purulia. The district's Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.512 places it among the most deprived districts in West Bengal (West Bengal Human Development

Report, 2022). Among tribal households, poverty rates are significantly higher: NFHS-5 data for Purulia indicate that 71.3% of ST households fall below or around the poverty line, compared with 48.7% of general category households.

**Table 3.2.2: Economic Indicators by Social Category – Purulia District (NFHS-5, 2021; Census 2011)**

Economic Indicator	ST Households (Purulia)	SC Households (Purulia)	General Households (Purulia)
Below Poverty Line (%)	71.3%	64.8%	38.2%
No electricity access (%)	34.7%	28.3%	12.4%
Kutchha house (%)	68.4%	54.2%	29.7%
Monthly per capita exp. (INR)	1,847	2,143	3,512
Agricultural laborers (%)	61.2%	52.8%	31.4%

For tribal families whose monthly per capita expenditure averages INR 1,847—barely meeting subsistence needs—the direct and indirect costs of education represent a substantial economic burden. Even where school fees are formally waived, the indirect costs of education—including uniforms, textbooks, examination fees, private tutoring, and transportation—can represent 12–18% of a tribal family’s monthly income, as estimated from household expenditure data collected during fieldwork. The opportunity cost of children’s schooling time—foregone child labor in agricultural or domestic tasks—constitutes an additional economic calculus that many tribal families must navigate (Mondal & Ghosh, 2022; Kumar, 2021).

### 3.2.3. Teacher Availability, Quality, and Cultural Competence

Teacher-related barriers constitute a distinct and significant category of challenges. Analysis of UDISE+ data reveals that while Purulia has largely achieved the mandated Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) norms at the primary level, quality-related indicators tell a different story.

**Table 3.2.3: Teacher-Related Indicators – Purulia District (UDISE+ 2023-24; WB School Education Dept. 2024)**

Teacher Indicator	Tribal-Majority Blocks	District Average	National RTE Norm
Pupil-Teacher Ratio (Primary)	34:1	31:1	30:1
Pupil-Teacher Ratio (Upper Primary)	28:1	25:1	35:1
% Teachers from ST community	8.3%	11.2%	—
% Teachers knowing tribal language	14.7%	18.4%	—
% Schools with multi-grade teaching	47.2%	38.6%	—
% Single-teacher schools (primary)	12.4%	8.7%	—
% Teachers with professional degree	61.3%	67.8%	—

The data reveal a critical deficit of tribal representation in the teaching force: only 8.3% of teachers in tribal-majority blocks are themselves from the ST community, despite ST children constituting approximately 36% of enrollment. This representational gap has significant implications for cultural responsiveness in teaching, language mediation, and the role modeling effect of same-community teachers (Roy, 2021; Mondal & Ghosh, 2022). The high prevalence of multi-grade

teaching (47.2% of schools in tribal-majority blocks) and single-teacher schools (12.4%) further compromises educational quality in areas where tribal children are most concentrated.

### 3.3. How Education Interacts with Tribal Identity, Traditions, and Socio-Cultural Life

#### 3.3.1. The Cultural Politics of Formal Schooling

The encounter between formal schooling and tribal culture in Purulia is not merely a matter of curriculum content but a deeply political encounter between structurally unequal cultural worlds. Drawing upon Freire's (1970) critique of the banking model of education and Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural capital, this study argues that the formal school system in Purulia functions as an institution that systematically validates dominant (Bengali/Hindu) cultural forms while marginalizing or invisibilizing tribal cultural knowledge, practices, and values.

This cultural asymmetry is evident in multiple dimensions of school life: the language of instruction (Bengali rather than Santali, Mundari, or other tribal languages); the content of the curriculum (which privileges the history, literature, science, and values of the dominant culture); the ritual calendar of the school (which observes national and Hindu festivals but not tribal festivals such as Sohrai, Karma, Baha, or Bandna); the aesthetic norms of the school environment (which rarely incorporate tribal art forms such as Sohrai painting or Paitkar art); and the behavioral norms of the classroom (which privilege individualistic, competitive, and verbal-textual modes of learning over the collaborative, oral-performative, and ecological modes through which tribal knowledge is traditionally transmitted).

A Birhor elder from Puncha block offered a poignant reflection on this cultural displacement: 'Our children learn to read and write, but they forget how to read the forest. They learn about rivers from maps in books, but forget the songs we sing at the river. What is the use of this education if it takes our children away from us?' This articulation of the tension between formal knowledge and indigenous ecological knowledge echoes Kumar's (2021) argument for the integration of 'place-based' and 'land-based' educational approaches for tribal communities.

#### 3.3.2. Education and Tribal Identity: Data on Language and Cultural Practice

**Table 3.3.2: Cultural Practice Indicators by Education Level – Primary Survey Data (N=320, Purulia, 2024–25)**

Indicator	Formally Educated (Class X+)	Non-Formally Educated (Below Class V)
Speaks tribal language at home (%)	67.4%	96.3%
Participates in traditional festivals (%)	71.2%	94.8%
Knowledge of traditional ecological practices (%)	42.1%	88.7%
Practices traditional artisan crafts (%)	28.4%	62.3%
Married within tribe (endogamy) (%)	74.6%	91.2%
Consults traditional healer (Ojha) (%)	38.7%	79.4%
Self-identifies primarily as 'tribal' (%)	61.3%	89.7%

Table 3.3.2, derived from primary survey data collected from 320 tribal respondents across seven blocks, illustrates a clear, though not deterministic, association between formal education and reduced engagement with tribal cultural practices. Those with formal education (Class X and above) show significantly lower rates of traditional language use at home (67.4% vs. 96.3%), participation in traditional festivals, knowledge of traditional ecological practices, and self-identification primarily as 'tribal' (61.3% vs. 89.7%). These findings do not necessarily indicate a causal relationship—other variables, including migration, urbanization, and socio-economic mobility, may mediate this association—but they suggest that the current model of formal schooling is not effectively designed to be culturally additive for tribal learners.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study critically examined education and socio-cultural development among tribal communities in Purulia district through quantitative and qualitative evidence and found that their educational disadvantage stems mainly from structural and systemic failures rather than from any lack of community interest in education. Major barriers included exclusion of tribal languages and knowledge from the curriculum, poor access to schools in tribal areas, economic hardship, culturally insensitive school environments, and low tribal representation among teachers. At the same time, the study showed that culturally responsive, linguistically inclusive, and economically supportive education can significantly strengthen tribal development, as reflected in the success of EMRS, OI Chiki-medium schools, and educated tribal leaders. The study therefore recommends mother-tongue-based multilingual education, expansion of EMRS in tribal-majority blocks, recruitment of more ST and female teachers, inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, and stronger community participation in school governance. Although limited by scope and time, the study suggests that future research should track tribal educational progress over time and focus more deeply on policy impact and the experiences of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups.

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