

OCTOBER, 2022

# Education in tribal communities

## Spotlight on Odisha

The state of Odisha is home to the largest proportion of India's tribal population (9.17%) (Census of India, 2011), with nine of its thirty districts being considered tribal districts. **Our research is centered within the second-largest district, Sundargarh, located in the north-west of the state with a 20.93 lakh strong population (Census of India, 2011).**

**81%** The reported literacy rate for males in the district

**65.5%** The reported literacy rate for females in the district

**50.7% of the population belong to Scheduled Tribes**, with Bhuyan, Gonda, Kharia, Kisan, Munda and Oran being the main communities. **However, the literacy rates within the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities are lower than the district average.**

The reported literacy rate for males belonging to ST communities **41.3%**

The reported literacy rate for females belonging to ST communities **29.6%**

Against the backdrop of the National Education Policy in 1992 and the Right to Education Act of 2009, we have seen increased emphasis on preventing student drop-outs, strengthening literacy levels among marginalized groups, and providing additional support to girls' education (DHDR, 2015).

**While our research explores how students orient themselves towards their futures, it places specific focus on the intersection between tribal identities and girlhood.**

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## Highlights

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**2** Imagining futures through schooling

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# Educational aspirations

## Inequities in imagining futures

Education development policy has taken shape in the form of initiatives such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, midday meal schemes, and the Biju Juba Sasaktikaran Yojana, which provides laptops to students based on merit (Das and Mahapatra, 2017). These programs aim to bridge caste literacy gaps and create a more sensitive education system. **However, research conducted in the Balasore and Mayurbhanj districts of Odisha has shown a significant difference in the level of educational aspirations between students belonging to scheduled tribes and their non-tribe counterparts** (Behera and Samal, 2015).

The factors that feed into this include, but are not limited to **economic backwardness, internalization of societal norms, low confidence, limited access to resources, language barriers and lack of well-connected social network to rely on** (Behera and Samal, 2015).

Fundamentally, **schools promote the idea that one's future can be imagined and controlled through hard work and effort** (Ansell et al., 2020). The problem arises when a failure to secure this future is attributed to a lack of effort. In the case of children from tribal communities, schools very rarely make meaningful connections to their home lifestyles or offer preparation for rural livelihoods (Ansell et al., 2020).

**The problem, thus, is not limited aspiration, but limited options to unattainable futures** – students possess the ability to hope, but have little control over the several external factors that determine their futures.



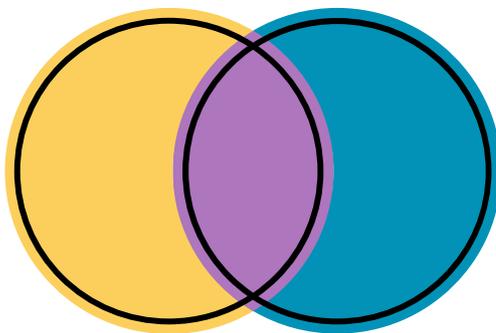
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# Marginal girlhood and the question of empowerment

As of 2018, the average annual drop-out rate among Scheduled Tribe students in India at the primary, upper-primary and secondary levels was 40.2% (Mohanty et al., 2019). In a study conducted on the Sundergarh and Mayurbhanj districts of Odisha, this drop-out percentage was found to be higher in sixth to eighth grade students (Mohanty et al., 2019). **For girls specifically, the main obstacles to their education involved expectations to take up household work, discomfort around male teachers, and parents' apprehensions regarding their safety on the way to school as well as within school premises** (Srivastava 2020; Mohanty et al., 2019; Das Gupta 2018). It is important to take cognizance of this intersection of caste and gender with respect to the education of tribal women.



D'Cruz (2021) draws attention to what she terms '**marginal girlhood**' i.e. **the stories of girls who are excluded from upper-class and upper-caste hegemony, making them more vulnerable within an already marginalized group.**

The discourse around the empowerment of girls belonging to scheduled castes and tribes quite often presumes a savior-victim dynamic that should be checked for (D'Cruz, 2021). **Empowerment is an intangible, complex concept, as seen by the number of organizations navigating its different elements.**

The Humara Bachpan Trust, for instance, provides training to adolescent girls in Sundargarh to help with aspiration mapping, communication skills and time management (Sarkar, 2021). Similarly, there are projects targeting empowerment through womens' land ownership (Masoodi, 2018), residential camps for girls who never enrolled in school or dropped out early (Srivastava, 2020), sports training (Ghosh, 2015) etc.

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# Sensitivities in research and areas of further inquiry

A common reductionist assumption when engaging with vulnerable communities (in this case, marginalized girls) in research settings is that they need protection from their patriarchal, regressive home environments and should be taught to aspire beyond it (D’Cruz, 2021). **It is imperative, therefore, in any study of marginal girlhoods, that we be attuned to the nuances of both the vulnerability as well as the power in the identity in question.**

**As researchers in this space, we are aware of our position as socially, culturally and economically distinct external observers, and take note of how our own identities may interact with the field that we seek to better understand.** As a next step, we seek on-ground ethnographic exploration being conducted by researchers who belong to these communities themselves, and whose experiences are rooted in the field. We aim to examine the following lines of inquiry and achieve inclusive, participatory insights:

1. What do female tribal students feel about coming to school? Which aspects of it do they look forward to and which aspects of it do they not enjoy?
2. What has school helped them realize about their interests and plans for the future?
3. What has helped them pursue their interests and plan their future?
4. What does their day outside of school look like?
5. When they think of their future, where do they see themselves and what do they see themselves doing?

Given the sociocultural context, **it is necessary to examine how aspirations are generated and revised with the passage of time, experience and community expectations.**

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