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Development Education and Status of Tribal Development in Odisha

Chintamani Majhi^{a,b,}, Bikali Charan Das^a*

^a Department of Education, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, 753003, India

^b PG department of Education, Fakir Mohan University, Balasore, 756019, India

ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the role of development education in enhancing the status of tribal development in Odisha, India. With 62 tribal communities constituting nearly 23% of the state's population, Odisha presents a compelling case for evaluating the intersections of education, socio-economic upliftment, and cultural preservation among indigenous groups. It focusses on the Kondh (Kandhamal), Bhatra (Nabarangpur), Gond (Balangir and Nuapada), and Santal (Mayurbhanj) tribes, the research adopts a mixed-methods approach, utilizing secondary data, census statistics, and qualitative insights from field-based literature. Findings reveal substantial improvements in school access, female literacy, and localized initiatives like the Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) programme. Educational interventions have begun to address gender disparities and socio-economic barriers, and enabled tribal youth to diversify livelihoods and assert their rights. Moreover, culturally responsive pedagogies have helped in preserving indigenous languages and fostering bicultural competence. Despite the progress, challenges persist in areas such as teacher availability, infrastructure, and post-secondary transitions. The study concludes that development education, when culturally contextualized and community-oriented, is a transformative tool for empowering tribal populations and achieving inclusive development in line with national and global goals.

Keywords: Development Education, Tribal Development, Socio-Economic Empowerment

Introduction

The use of education as a catalyst for socio-economic progress, referred to as 'Development Education' (DE), has been a cornerstone of tribal development policy in India, and Odisha in particular. Odisha is home to 62 tribal communities, among which 13 are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, constituting around 23% of the state's population (Sahoo, 2013). These communities predominantly reside in hilly, forested regions, which historically lag behind in education and economic indicators. Studies show tribal literacy rates far below state averages, contributing to entrenched poverty (Behera, 2017). As Galbraith famously observed, "there is no well-educated, literate population that is poor; and no illiterate population that is other than poor," highlighting education's critical role in development. In this context, the Government of Odisha and various agencies have prioritized education as a means to empower tribal communities and improve their well-being.

This article examines the role and impact of development education on the status of tribal development in Odisha, with a focus on specific tribal groups and districts: the Kondh of Kandhamal, the Bhatra of Nabarangpur, the Gond of Balangir and Nuapada, and the Santal of Mayurbhanj. These cases represent a cross-section of Odisha's tribal belt, each with distinct cultural identities yet facing common challenges in education access, literacy, economic upliftment, cultural preservation, and community empowerment. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study explores how educational initiatives have shaped outcomes in these communities.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the impact of development education on tribal literacy in Odisha.
2. To explore how education contributes to socio-economic and cultural upliftment.
3. To assess the role of education in preserving tribal identity.

Review of Literature

A significant body of research shows that mainstream education approaches have often failed tribal communities due to language barriers and cultural mismatches, which have resulted in high dropout rates and low achievement (Dungdung & Pattanaik, 2020). Mishra (2025) reveals that historically Odia-language schooling in Kondh areas led to "silent classrooms" and dropouts, as children struggled to comprehend a non-native tongue. Missionary schools made some inroads in Kandhamal, but Kondh literacy levels remained significantly below the state averages. Bhatra & Khatua (2021) found that referring

to the 2011 census, Nabarangpur's overall literacy was 46%, with Scheduled Tribe literacy only 31.5%. Nearly half of these STs are Bhatra, whose female literacy stood around a mere 19%. This educational deprivation drags down human development indices for the community. Hansdah & Acharya (2018) highlighted that in remote Santal villages of Mayurbhanj, the literacy rate was only about 30% as of 2011. This was far below the district's overall 63% literacy, which reflected dire shortages in educational infrastructure. It also revealed that about 30% of schools in those villages had no teacher, and over 65% lacked road connectivity. These conditions severely hinder school attendance and perpetuate illiteracy. Sensus data reveals that Balangir had only 25% and Nuapada 16% female literacy among STs, which prompted the adoption of special interventions for girls' education. Access has improved, but completion rates remain low, with many children still dropping out before secondary level.

The literacy rates among tribal males and females in Odisha are significantly lower than the state's overall literacy rate. As of the 2011 Census, the literacy rate for the Scheduled Tribe (ST) population in Odisha was 52.24% (Parida & Ratnawali, 2020). This figure is considerably lower than the state's overall literacy rate, which was reported to be 72.9% in the same census period (Swargiary, 2023). The disparity in literacy rates highlights the educational challenges faced by tribal communities in Odisha, which are compounded by socio-economic factors and geographical isolation. The literacy rate among tribal males in Odisha is higher than that of tribal females, reflecting a gender disparity in educational attainment. This is consistent with national trends, where male literacy rates generally surpass those of females (Das & Sahoo, 2012; Das & Sahoo, 2012). The literacy rate for tribal females is particularly low, with various studies indicating that socio-economic barriers, cultural norms, and inadequate educational infrastructure contribute to this gap (Das & Sahoo, 2012; Rathore, 2011). Odisha's overall literacy rate, as per the 2011 Census, was 72.9%, which is significantly higher than the literacy rate of the tribal population (Swargiary, 2023). The gap between the literacy rates of the general population and the tribal population underscores the need for targeted educational interventions to bridge this divide (Parida & Ratnawali, 2020; Behera, 2014).

Literature suggests that improving tribal education in Odisha requires culturally sensitive approaches, community involvement, and sustained support to overcome socio-economic barriers. Successful models like the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), a large residential school for tribals, are often cited as templates for empowerment through education.

Theoretical Lens

This research is framed by a human development and empowerment perspective. Education is viewed both as a fundamental human development indicator and as an instrumental tool for empowering marginalized communities (Maharana, 2015). The human capital theory posits that investments in education increase skills and productivity and lead to socio-economic upliftment. This is relevant for Odisha's tribes, where a lack of education has been a root cause of poverty and underdevelopment. By improving educational access and quality, development education aims to enhance human capital, which results in better employment opportunities, incomes, and overall well-being. At the same time, the study adopts an empowerment and cultural capital lens where education is not merely about literacy and jobs; it is also about enabling individuals and communities to participate confidently in societal and political processes. The capability approach of Amartya Sen underpins the view that education expands the freedoms and capabilities of tribal people, which allows them to lead lives they value (e.g. maintaining their cultural heritage while engaging with the wider economy). In tribal contexts, empowerment through education involves preserving indigenous languages and cultural practices. This perspective aligns with Odisha's mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programme, which recognizes tribal languages in schooling. By valuing tribal culture in formal education, the MTB-MLE approach aims to enhance learning outcomes and self-esteem among tribal children, which reflects Freire's idea of education as a practice of freedom.

The conceptual framework thus links development education with outcomes in multiple domains such as educational access, economic well-being and socio-cultural preservation. The theoretical lens anticipates that targeted educational interventions will lead to improved literacy and numeracy, which in turn contribute to socio-economic development and greater community empowerment. It also posits that when education is delivered in a culturally relevant way, it will not erode, but rather strengthen, tribal identity and social capital. These assumptions are explored in the present study across the chosen tribal communities in Odisha.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative data and qualitative insights to examine the impact of development education on tribal development.

Data Sources: Quantitative data were drawn from publicly available sources such as the Census of India 2011 (for literacy rates, demographic figures), official reports from the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India (for state and district-level tribal education statistics), and the Government of Odisha (ST & SC Development Department's annual reports). These provided concrete indicators of educational access, literacy levels, and socio-economic metrics in the target districts.

Qualitative information was obtained through a review of the literature and case studies. Academic studies offered insights into the historical and cultural context of education among the Kondh, Bhatra, Gond, and Santal communities. In addition, reports and documents from development programmes were analyzed to gather narrative evidence of changes brought by educational interventions. These qualitative sources helped interpret the numbers and added depth to aspects like community attitudes, challenges faced in programme implementation, and outcomes.

Mixed-Methods Integration: The study combines these data in a complementary manner. For example, a census statistic on female literacy in Nabarangpur is paired with a field observation from a case study that explains why the figure is low (e.g. cultural norms or lack of schools). Likewise, an improvement in enrollment numbers over time is discussed alongside policy changes or programs that likely contributed to it. This triangulation strengthens the analysis by ensuring that trends are not viewed in isolation from ground realities. The mixed-methods approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how development education has influenced tribal development in Odisha, acknowledging both the progress made and the challenges that remain.

Results and Discussion

Educational Access and Literacy Outcomes

Over the past two decades, Odisha has expanded schooling infrastructure in tribal regions through measures like residential Ashram schools, Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), free textbooks, midday meals, and recruitment of local-language teachers. These efforts have boosted enrollment in our focus districts, bringing primary schools closer to remote tribal hamlets. As a result, attendance of tribal children in primary education has increased significantly, and the gap in school enrollment between tribal and non-tribal areas has narrowed. The increased access has translated into gradual improvements in literacy, though significant gaps remain. According to the Census, literacy among Odisha's ST population rose from 37% in 2001 to 52% in 2011, which indicates progress, but a disparity was observed. In our study areas, Nabarangpur remained the lowest (46.4% overall literacy; ST literacy 31.5%, with female ST literacy only 23%). Kandhamal improved to 65% overall by 2011, but Kondh communities still lagged, with ST female literacy around 40%. Balangir and Nuapada saw gains after 2001, where female ST literacy rose from 20% to 40% by 2011 due to targeted schemes. Mayurbhanj had about 53% tribal literacy, although Santals in remote pockets remained around 30% literate as of 2011.

While it is still below the general population's literacy in Odisha (73% in 2011), the upward trend among tribal communities is evident. Notably, female literacy, which was abysmally low in 2001 (e.g. only 11% of ST women literate in Nabarangpur), has improved by 2011 to 22–40% in most of these districts. This can be attributed to focused interventions like 'Strengthening Education among ST Girls in Low Literacy Districts', which provided residential schooling and incentives for girls in districts such as Nabarangpur, Nuapada, and Kandhamal. Bridging the gender gap remains a priority, but more tribal girls are in school now than ever before, which is a crucial change for these communities.

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Socio-Economic Upliftment

Education is gradually affecting the socio-economic conditions of these communities. Educational attainment plays a pivotal role in enabling individuals to move beyond subsistence farming and daily wage labour. In all four focus areas, there are early signs of socio-economic upliftment linked to education. There are now a few cases of tribal youth from districts like Nabarangpur attaining higher education (even post-graduate degrees) and securing jobs as teachers, lecturers, or civil servants. Such success stories, though still few, were unheard of a generation ago and illustrate the new paths education is opening up.

However, poverty remains widespread in these communities. Education is viewed as a long-term means to break this cycle, but its impact on income levels will take time to fully materialize. Most tribal households continue to rely on agriculture and forest-based livelihoods, and many educated youth still face unemployment or underemployment due to limited job opportunities in their local area. One tangible impact observed is employment diversification, where some educated Kondh and Gond youth have taken up vocational trades (electrician, mechanic, drivers) and found jobs in the government or NGO sector, which reduces their dependence on traditional livelihoods. In Santal areas of Mayurbhanj, educated individuals have been pivotal in organizing cooperatives for Sal leaf plate making and other micro-enterprises, thus adding value to traditional practices.

Government programmes also integrate education with livelihoods, like the Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihoods Programme (OTELP) in Kandhamal and Nabarangpur builds skills and blends indigenous knowledge with new techniques through training and functional literacy sessions. This has helped many participants adopt better farming practices, manage finances via self-help groups, and engage with markets. Households with even one educated member tend to fare better in accessing government schemes, healthcare, guiding the next generation, and creating a gradual virtuous cycle of development. However, the overall economic transformation is slow, and education is laying the groundwork for improved socio-economic status by empowering individuals with knowledge and skills that enhance their livelihood options and financial security.

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Cultural Preservation

An important dimension of development education in tribal areas is its impact on cultural preservation. There has historically been tension between formal education imparted in the dominant state language and tribal cultures, often leading to erosion of indigenous languages and practices. However, Odisha has attempted to make education a vehicle for cultural preservation rather than assimilation. A landmark initiative in this regard is the Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) programme. Odisha's MTB-MLE, started in the late 1990s and expanded in phases, and introduced in primary education in tribal languages such as Kui (Kondh language in Kandhamal), Santali (in Mayurbhanj), Gondi, Bhatra (in Nabarangpur), and others. By

incorporating tribal folklore, songs, and local examples in the curriculum, this approach validated and preserved tribal heritage within the school system. For example, in Kondh-majority Kandhamal schools, teachers use Kui primers and Kondh folktales in lessons, ensuring the language is passed on even as students also learn Odia and English.

The Odisha government also undertook the creation of bilingual tribal dictionaries in 21 tribal languages. In 2018, these dictionaries were released to help promote and preserve tribal languages, and they are used in multilingual education at the elementary level. The dictionaries, along with trilingual tribal language modules, help bridge tribal languages with Odia and English, fostering pride in the mother tongue. Such efforts are vital because many tribal languages lacked written resources and were at risk of fading in the face of dominant languages. Notably, Santali now has its script (Ol Chiki) and is taught in schools and colleges, which has invigorated Santali literature and media.

This approach to education promotes bicultural competence, where tribal youth can engage with modern society without losing their cultural and linguistic identity. As schools show respect for tribal languages and traditions, community acceptance of formal education has grown, alleviating earlier fears that schooling would alienate children from their roots.

Community Empowerment and Participation

Education is increasingly empowering tribal communities by giving them greater agency and voice. There are cases of educated youth assuming local leadership roles (e.g. elected panchayat members, and becoming Sarapanch) and literate villagers more confidently engaging with officials to claim their rights and entitlements. Women's education, in particular, is slowly shifting gender norms where educated young women tend to marry later, participate in self-help groups, and serve as community role models, though patriarchal attitudes persist. Moreover, even basic literacy and schooling have provided tribal people with tools, language skills, confidence, and awareness to organize and tackle local issues that previously went unaddressed.

Conclusion

Development education has emerged as a key driver of change for tribal communities in Odisha, as seen in our focus districts. Through a combination of government initiatives, non-governmental efforts, and community participation, notable strides have been made in improving educational access and literacy among these groups. Literacy rates, while still below state averages, are on an upward trajectory, creating a foundation for further development. Education has contributed to socio-economic upliftment by opening new livelihood opportunities and enhancing awareness of health, rights, and governance. A salient outcome is that modern education is being integrated with tribal identity, so that development does not come at the cost of cultural erosion. Initiatives like mother-tongue education and tribal dictionaries ensure that children can achieve in school while retaining pride in their heritage. This culturally responsive approach has boosted community buy-in and made education a more empowering experience. Development education has positively impacted various aspects of tribal development in Odisha by improving literacy and schooling outcomes, contributing to socio-economic upliftment, aiding in cultural preservation, and fostering community empowerment. The cases of Kandhamal, Nabarangpur, Balangir, Nuapada, and Mayurbhanj illustrate both the potential and the complexity of this endeavour. As Odisha and India strive for inclusive, sustainable development (echoing the Sustainable Development Goals on education and inequality reduction), the lessons from these tribal districts are invaluable. Education, when tailored to the needs and context of tribal communities, can indeed be the cornerstone for unlocking their full development potential.

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