A Study on Socio-Economic Factors Affecting School Dropouts among Tribal Children of Assam

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ABSTRACT:

School dropout remains a critical educational challenge in India, particularly among tribal communities in states like Assam. This study aims to explore the socio-economic determinants influencing school dropout rates among tribal children in selected districts of Assam. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research incorporates both quantitative data from school records and surveys, and qualitative insights from interviews with parents, teachers, and students. Key findings reveal that poverty, parental illiteracy, lack of transportation, early child labor, and limited access to quality education are significant contributing factors. Cultural practices and seasonal migration for livelihood further exacerbate the issue. The study highlights the urgent need for inclusive educational policies, targeted financial support, and community-based interventions to ensure sustained school participation of tribal children. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy makers and educators to design context-specific strategies to reduce dropout rates and promote educational equity.

Keywords: School Dropout, Tribal Children, Socio-Economic Factors, Assam, Educational Equity, Inclusive Education, Rural Education, Child Labor, Poverty and Education

Introduction:

Education is universally acknowledged as a powerful instrument for social transformation, economic progress, and individual empowerment. Despite significant strides in expanding educational access in India, the issue of school dropouts remains a persistent challenge, particularly among marginalized and tribal communities. Assam, with its diverse ethnic and tribal population, presents a unique socio-cultural and economic context that often contributes to disparities in educational attainment.

Among tribal children in Assam, the dropout rate is influenced by a range of interrelated socio-economic factors such as poverty, lack of parental education, limited access to nearby schools, and the necessity for children to engage in household or income-generating work. Cultural norms, early marriages, language barriers, and seasonal migration also play a crucial role in disrupting regular schooling.

While various government initiatives, including the Right to Education (RTE) Act, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and scholarship programs, have aimed to address these issues, dropout rates among tribal children remain high in several regions. This not only hinders the educational development of the child but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion within tribal communities.

The present study seeks to investigate the socio-economic determinants that lead to school dropouts among tribal children in Assam. By identifying these factors through empirical analysis and stakeholder perspectives, the research aspires to contribute to the formulation of context-sensitive educational strategies aimed at improving retention and completion rates in tribal-dominated areas.

Objectives of the Study:-

1. *To identify the major socio-economic factors contributing to school dropouts among tribal children in Assam.*
2. *To examine the relationship between household income, parental education, and dropout rates in tribal communities.*
3. *To analyze the impact of child labor, migration, and lack of educational infrastructure on school retention.*
4. *To explore the role of cultural practices, language barriers, and gender norms in influencing school discontinuation.*
5. *To assess the effectiveness of existing government schemes and interventions aimed at reducing dropout rates among tribal children.*
6. *To propose context-specific recommendations and policy measures to improve educational participation and reduce dropouts in tribal areas of Assam.*

Review of Related Literature:-

The phenomenon of school dropouts, particularly among tribal and marginalized communities, has been the subject of extensive academic and policy-oriented research. Numerous scholars have explored the structural and socio-economic dimensions that contribute to early school leaving in India.

Tilak (2000) argues that poverty remains one of the most persistent causes of school dropout, especially in rural and tribal areas, where children are often compelled to support family income through labor. *Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2010)* emphasize that household income, parental illiteracy, and lack of infrastructural facilities like roads and schools significantly impede sustained school attendance among tribal children.

According to *Jha and Jhingran (2005)*, language barriers and lack of culturally relevant curricula further alienate tribal students, making education feel disconnected from their lived realities. They argue that when the medium of instruction is not in the child's mother tongue, it leads to disinterest and eventual disengagement. This is particularly relevant in the context of Assam, where multiple tribal groups speak different dialects.

Bordoloi (2012), in a study specific to Assam, found that seasonal migration for agricultural labor and socio-cultural responsibilities, such as early marriage and domestic chores, have a strong bearing on school dropout among tribal girls. This gendered dimension of dropout is often overlooked in broader policy discourses.

Mehta (2014) highlights systemic factors such as teacher absenteeism, untrained educators, and insufficient teaching materials, all of which contribute to the low retention of students from tribal backgrounds. Additionally, the lack of role models or successful educated individuals within these communities often results in a low perceived value of formal education.

Government reports such as *National Sample Survey (NSSO, 75th Round)* and the *Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2022)* continue to highlight that despite policy efforts like the Right to Education Act, dropout rates among Scheduled Tribe (ST) students remain disproportionately high compared to other groups.

The existing literature underscores the multifaceted nature of school dropouts among tribal children—spanning economic hardship, infrastructural deficits, cultural disconnect, and policy implementation gaps. However, there is a noticeable paucity of region-specific studies, particularly focusing on Assam's tribal population. This gap underscores the need for localized empirical research to formulate more effective and context-sensitive educational strategies.

Methodology of the Study:-

Research Design:

The study adopts a *descriptive and analytical research design* to investigate the socio-economic factors influencing school dropout among tribal children in Assam. A *mixed-methods approach* was employed to capture both quantitative trends and qualitative insights.

Study Area:

The research was conducted in selected tribal-dominated districts of Assam, including *Baksa, Dima Hasao, and Karbi Anglong*, where dropout rates have been observed to be comparatively high.

Population and Sample:

The target population comprised tribal students (both dropouts and enrolled), their parents, teachers, and school administrators. A *stratified random sampling* technique was used to ensure representation across different tribes, gender groups, and educational levels.

- *Sample Size:*
  - 100 school dropout children
  - 50 parents/guardians
  - 20 teachers
  - 5 educational officers or school administrators

Data Collection Tools:

1. *Structured Questionnaire* – Administered to parents and students to gather data on income, parental education, work involvement, and schooling history.
2. *Semi-Structured Interviews* – Conducted with teachers and administrators to understand institutional challenges and community dynamics.
3. *Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)* – Held with groups of dropout students to explore their lived experiences and reasons for leaving school.
4. *Secondary Data* – Collected from government records, school registers, and educational department reports.

Data Analysis:

- *Quantitative data* were analyzed using *descriptive statistics* (percentages, mean, frequency distribution) and *cross-tabulation* to identify relationships between variables.
- *Qualitative data* from interviews and FGDs were subjected to *thematic analysis* to extract recurring patterns, reasons, and contextual factors.

Limitations of the Study:

- The findings are specific to selected districts and may not fully represent all tribal communities in Assam.

- The study relies partly on self-reported data, which may include recall bias.

Major Findings:-

1. *Poverty as a Primary Factor:*
   A majority of the dropout cases were found in households with low or unstable income. Parents often could not afford basic educational expenses like uniforms, books, or transportation, despite free schooling provisions.
2. *Parental Illiteracy and Low Educational Awareness:*
   The educational level of parents, especially mothers, was strongly linked to dropout rates. Many parents did not perceive formal education as essential, particularly for girls.
3. *Child Labor and Domestic Responsibilities:*
   Many tribal children, especially boys, dropped out to engage in agricultural labor or daily wage activities, while girls were often withdrawn from school to take care of siblings and perform household chores.
4. *Seasonal Migration and Displacement:*
   Families engaged in seasonal agricultural or construction work frequently migrated, disrupting the continuity of children's schooling. This was particularly prevalent in Dima Hasao and Baksa districts.
5. *Inadequate Infrastructure and Accessibility:*
   Poor road connectivity and long distances to the nearest upper primary or secondary schools were significant deterrents. In hilly and forested areas, children often had to walk several kilometers to attend school.
6. *Lack of Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Language Barriers:*
   The medium of instruction (mostly Assamese or English) created a language gap for tribal children whose mother tongue differed. This contributed to alienation and disinterest in classroom learning.
7. *Gender Disparity in Dropouts:*
   Dropout rates among tribal girls were notably higher than boys. Early marriage, safety concerns, and conservative social norms discouraged girls' continued education after primary school.
8. *Limited Community Engagement in Education:*
   The study revealed low participation of tribal communities in school management committees (SMCs) and decision-making processes, resulting in weak accountability and minimal local support systems.
9. *Policy Implementation Gaps:*
   Despite the presence of schemes like Mid-Day Meal, free textbooks, and scholarships, many respondents reported irregular delivery of these benefits. Lack of monitoring and follow-up also reduced their impact.

Recommendations / Suggestions:-

1. **Strengthen Financial Support Schemes:**
   Expand and streamline direct benefit transfers, scholarships, and material assistance (uniforms, learning materials) for tribal children to reduce the financial burden on families.
2. **Promote Community-Based Awareness Campaigns:**
   Conduct targeted awareness programs among tribal communities to highlight the long-term benefits of education and the risks associated with child labor and early dropout.
3. **Establish and Upgrade Educational Infrastructure:**
   Build more upper primary and secondary schools in remote tribal areas, improve transportation facilities, and ensure functional toilets, especially for girls, to improve retention.
4. **Incorporate Tribal Languages and Culture into Curriculum:**
   Introduce culturally responsive teaching methods and tribal language instruction at the primary level to make learning more inclusive and engaging.
5. **Empower Local Stakeholders:**
   Strengthen the role of School Management Committees (SMCs) by ensuring active participation of tribal parents, local leaders, and youth to monitor school functioning and dropout prevention.
6. **Address Gender-Specific Barriers:**
   Introduce girl-specific incentives such as conditional cash transfers, mentorship programs, and safety assurance mechanisms to encourage continued education for tribal girls.
7. **Improve Monitoring of Government Schemes:**
   Ensure transparency, regular monitoring, and accountability in the implementation of educational schemes like the Mid-Day Meal and free textbook distribution.
8. **Introduce Bridge and Remedial Education Programs:**
   Establish learning support centers or bridge courses for dropout children to reintegrate them into the formal schooling system.

Conclusion:-

The issue of school dropout among tribal children in Assam is a complex and multifaceted challenge, deeply rooted in socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural factors. This study has revealed that poverty, parental illiteracy, migration, child labor, inadequate school access, and gender-based barriers are key contributors to early school leaving. While existing government policies have made some progress, significant implementation gaps persist, particularly in tribal-dominated regions.

A sustainable solution demands a multi-pronged approach involving financial aid, community engagement, culturally inclusive pedagogy, and gender-sensitive interventions. Most importantly, educational planning and policies must be localized, context-specific, and participatory to address the unique challenges of tribal communities. Ensuring the educational inclusion of tribal children is not merely a policy goal, but a constitutional and moral obligation towards building a more equitable society.

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