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A Critical Analysis of Issues Related to Education in the Santal Community

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Abstract

This research paper presents a critical analysis of the current educational situation among the Santal community, one of the largest Scheduled Tribes in India. Despite significant strides in primary school enrollment, the community faces persistent challenges, including high dropout rates at higher educational levels, low literacy rates compared to national averages, and a pervasive issue of educated unemployment. The analysis identifies multifaceted barriers such as extreme socio-economic disparities, profound language barriers due to non-mother tongue instruction, cultural disconnects within mainstream curricula, inadequate educational infrastructure, and a critical shortage of culturally sensitive and linguistically competent teachers. Furthermore, the paper highlights gaps in policy implementation and instances of discrimination that impede educational progress. Drawing on recent data and ethnographic studies, this paper argues for a comprehensive, culturally responsive, and economically integrated approach to Santal education, emphasizing mother-tongue instruction, targeted economic support, and enhanced teacher training to foster genuine empowerment and social equity.

Keywords

Santal, Education, India.

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2

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1. Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as a fundamental human right and a powerful catalyst for social transformation, particularly for marginalized communities. For the Santal community, a prominent indigenous group, education is increasingly recognized as vital for improving living conditions, securing gainful employment, and integrating successfully into broader societal structures. It also serves as a crucial mechanism to protect individuals from various forms of exploitation that the community has historically endured.

The Santal population, numbering over five million, is concentrated in Indian states such as West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Odisha, with significant populations also in Bangladesh and Nepal. They constitute the third-largest tribal group in India and the largest in West Bengal. Predominantly engaged in agriculture or daily wage labor in sectors like coal mines and tea gardens, they often face extreme poverty and economic marginalization. Their language, Santali, belongs to the Munda (Austroasiatic) family, forming a distinct cultural identity (Dutta & Sinha, 2022).

Despite growing awareness within the Santal community regarding the importance of education, their educational journey is fraught with complex and interconnected challenges. This paper critically examines the current state of education among Santals, delving into the socio-economic, linguistic, cultural, infrastructural, and policy-related barriers that impede their educational attainment. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these challenges and propose actionable recommendations for fostering equitable and quality education for the Santal community.

2. Importance of Education for Scheduled Tribes

The concept of education for scheduled tribe (ST) extends beyond mere literacy; it encompasses the development of critical thinking, skills, and character, enabling them to participate fully as citizens

and avail themselves of the fruits of modern development (SHIVAA, n.d.). While some movements among Scheduled Castes historically championed education as a primary means to overcome oppression, for STs, government policy has largely focused on education as an avenue for integration into mainstream society (Mandal, 2023; Venkateswarlu & Kumar, 2023).

Education is a basic prerequisite for the removal of poverty and the development of any country (Concern Worldwide U.S., 2023; World Bank, n.d.), and this holds true for STs. Studies demonstrate a direct correlation between educational development and improved socio-economic status

3. Current Status of Santal Education

3.1 Literacy Rates and Trends

Literacy rates among the Santal community remain significantly lower than national and state averages, indicating a persistent educational disparity. According to the 2011 Census, the overall literacy rate for Santals in West Bengal was 54.72%, with a notable gender gap: 66.12% for males and 43.51% for females. While these figures are low, there has been a satisfactory decadal increase in literacy from 2001 to 2011, particularly among Santal females (Ahmed & Tattwasarananda, 2018).

Regional variations in literacy are also evident. For instance, studies in Jhargram district, West Bengal, reported a higher Santal literacy rate of 71.18% (79.82% male, 63.09% female). Similarly, a Santal village in Gujarat's Mahesana district showed a literacy rate of 75.34% (82.10% male, 68.14% female) (Ahmed & Tattwasarananda, 2018). These variations suggest that localized factors and interventions can significantly influence educational outcomes.

3.2 Enrollment and Dropout Patterns

Recent data from the Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE+) 2023-24 indicates near-universal Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for ST students at the primary (Grades 1-5) level, at 98.3%. This high initial enrollment suggests progress in ensuring basic access. The GER remains relatively high at the upper primary level (Grades 6-8) at 95.2%, and for elementary education (Grades 1-8) combined, it is 97.1% (Government of India, Department of School Education & Literacy, 2024).

However, a critical challenge emerges at higher educational stages. The national GER for ST students drops significantly to 76.9% at the secondary level (Grades 9-10), meaning nearly a quarter of ST children in this age group are not enrolled. The most dramatic decline occurs at the higher secondary level (Grades 11-12), where the GER plummets to 48.7%, indicating that less than half of ST youth access this level of education (Government of India, Department of School Education & Literacy, 2024).

Dropout rates remain alarmingly high, reaching almost 50% after the implementation of the Right to Education Act 2009. This issue is particularly severe from Class VII onwards, with Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) also showing a steep decline in enrollment at this stage (Rajalakshmi, 2025).

3.3 Higher Education Attainment and Educated Unemployment

Attainment of higher education among Santals is “alarmingly very low”. In a study area in West Bengal, only 2.22% of the Santal population had an undergraduate degree, and a mere 0.44% had a postgraduate degree (Ahmed & Tattwasarananda, 2018). This low attainment is attributed to low K-12 educational achievement, widespread poor economic conditions, and a scarcity of higher education institutions in their regions.

A significant consequence of this educational landscape is the prevalence of educated unemployment. The high rate of educated unemployment creates a paradoxical disincentive for Santal families to invest further in education, even as aspirations for upward social mobility are increasing. If education does not reliably lead to improved livelihoods and dignified employment, it reinforces the perception that it is a waste of precious time and resources (Baski, 2013), especially when child labor provides immediate economic value for survival.

4. Multifaceted Challenges and Barriers in Santal Education

4.1 Socio-Economic Disparities and Livelihood Pressures

Extreme poverty is pervasive within Santal communities, with many individuals working as daily wage laborers in sectors like tea gardens, coal mines, and agriculture, often earning low wages. They are frequently landless and economically marginalized (Rathee, Sarkar & Hooda, 2023).

The pressing economic situation often compels children, particularly among poor and landless tribal communities, to engage in labor to contribute to family income, frequently involving migration for daily wage work. This economic necessity is a primary driver of high dropout rates. Rapid population growth and increasingly fragmented small landholdings mean that traditional agricultural livelihoods can no longer support entire families, necessitating migration for work. This labor is often unregulated and informal, making them highly vulnerable to exploitation. The opportunity cost of schooling, the direct and immediate loss of potential income from child labor, often outweighs the long-term, uncertain benefits of education for these families, making immediate survival a rational priority (Baski, 2013).

4.2 Language Barrier and Medium of Instruction

Santal children consistently struggle in mainstream public schools due to a severe language barrier. They speak Santali as their mother tongue but are often taught by educators unfamiliar with their language. This linguistic mismatch results in low literacy rates.

The communication gap and lack of understanding can lead teachers and educational authorities to mistakenly perceive tribal children as not competent enough, exacerbating the problem and contributing to higher dropout rates. Educationists emphasize that learning a second language without mastering one's mother tongue leads to self-alienation and significantly hinders learning speed and depth. Reading and writing skills developed in the mother tongue are easily transferable to other languages (UNESCO, 2008).

The fragmentation of the Santali language community, with speakers dispersed across different states, poses challenges to language standardization, including the choice of a common script (Ol Chiki, Roman, or Devanagari). While Santali language has received some recognition, including its acceptance as an optional paper at the Matriculation level by some examination boards and postgraduate degrees in Santali language and literature by some universities, the constitutional provision (Article 350A) for mother-tongue instruction at the primary stage for linguistic minorities is not consistently practiced in government schools.

4.3 Cultural Disconnect and Curriculum Relevance

Santal students frequently encounter discrimination and culturally insensitive pedagogical practices in mainstream

educational settings. A significant issue is the lack of culturally relevant content in the curriculum, often missing references to Santal culture, rituals, festivals, and historical figures (Das, 2025). This absence contributes to feelings of alienation.

The traditional Santal way of life, characterized by a more lenient approach to rules for children and contentment with minimal material comforts, can conflict with the discipline and formal lifestyle often required for academic success in conventional schools. Some community members have expressed a belief that distancing themselves from their Santal culture is necessary for acceptance by the majority population, though many disagree, believing it is possible to be both Santal and integrated into mainstream society.

4.4 Infrastructural Deficiencies and Access Issues

Many tribal areas suffer from a severe lack of educational facilities, forcing children to travel considerable distances to attend schools. In Santal areas, the land tenancy system, specifically the Santal Parganas Tenancy Act 1949 (SPT Act 1949), prohibits land transfer, meaning many schools operate without legal title to their land (Rathakrishnan & Kumar, 2013). This lack of legal ownership prevents schools from obtaining recognition under the RTE Act 2009, which mandates specific physical infrastructure requirements (Rathakrishnan & Kumar, 2013).

Nationally, a considerable number of schools lack basic amenities: 1.5 lakh out of 14.7 lakh schools do not have regular, functional electricity, and 24,580 schools lack drinking water facilities (Government of India, Department of School Education & Literacy, 2024). Additionally, about 3.7% of toilets for girls are non-functional. Access for children with disabilities is inadequate, with only 52.3% of schools having handrails and ramps. Digital infrastructure is also limited, with only 57.2% having computers and 53.9% having internet access (Government of India, Department of School Education & Literacy, 2024). While the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* aimed to establish schools within reasonable distances, there has not been a proportional increase in secondary and higher secondary schools after the RTE Act, posing a significant risk of large-scale student dropouts at higher levels. Although this situation affects the general population, it has particularly adverse effects on the Santal community, which is already grappling with multiple challenges.

4.5 Teacher Availability, Training, and Cultural Sensitivity

Teacher shortages are a widespread problem in tribal areas, with many positions vacant. A significant communication barrier exists due to many teachers being deputed from other states and being unfamiliar with local tribal languages (Mohanty, 2009). In Santal areas, many teachers do not understand Santali.

Many teachers lack understanding and sensitivity towards tribal culture. This creates a significant social and psychological distance between teachers and students, impacting the learning environment (Nganga & Kambutu, 2024). To make the situation worse, there is a problem of shortage of capable teachers in general (ETV Bharat, 2024). Current teacher preparation programs are often inadequate, overlooking crucial aspects such as cultural competence, inclusive teaching practices, and emotional intelligence, leaving new teachers unprepared for diverse classrooms (Economic Times, 2025).

4.6 Policy Implementation Gaps and Discrimination

Despite comprehensive constitutional provisions guaranteeing equal access to education, including Article 21-A (Right to Education), Article 46 (interests of Scheduled Tribes), and Article 350A (instruction in mother tongue), the Santal community continues to be treated as an ethnic minority, with their basic educational demands often overlooked.

Government programs, though well-intentioned, are often criticized for being cumbersome and inefficient in their implementation. For example, the 5% quota for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in EMRS is not being met, partly because PVTG children struggle to pass entrance exams, indicating a mismatch between policy design and foundational learning levels (Rajalakshmi, 2025).

5. Recommendations

To foster genuine educational empowerment and social equity for the Santal community, a comprehensive and multi-pronged approach is essential.

To improve educational outcomes for Santal communities, a comprehensive approach must prioritize mother-tongue-based multilingual education by implementing Santali as the primary medium of instruction at elementary levels while developing

high-quality textbooks and learning materials in Santali for all Santal-populated areas. The curriculum should be revised to integrate Santal history, culture, oral traditions, festivals, and historical figures, alongside pedagogical practices that align with traditional learning styles such as storytelling and experiential learning.

In addition, initiatives led by the community itself will help a lot. Lakshmi Murmu Smriti Vidyalaya in Chaachanpur, West Bengal, exemplifies a successful community-led initiative that integrates Santali traditions into mainstream schooling. The school places equal emphasis on both Santali and Bengali languages, using Santali as the primary medium of communication in entry-level classes. This dual-language approach helps overcome language barriers and affirms cultural identity. The curriculum merges conventional education with day-to-day life experiences, incorporating Santali art and culture through performative arts and contextual learning. The school actively engages the community through a school committee and regular parent-teacher meetings combined with cultural events, fostering a sense of ownership and influencing community members about the importance of education (Suneja & Devi, 2019).

Another example is the Ghosaldanga Adibasi Seva Sanga (GASS) in West Bengal, which runs pre-schools and a primary school, teaching children in their mother tongue. Their curriculum includes Santali songs, music, tribal history, and folklore, while also ensuring literacy and numeracy (Marandi, 2020).

Targeted socio-economic support through direct financial assistance programs, conditional cash transfers, and scholarships is essential to offset opportunity costs for impoverished families. At the same time, linking educational initiatives with skill development programs and employment generation schemes are crucial to ensure education leads to dignified livelihoods. Infrastructure and legal barriers must be addressed through legal reforms, particularly in regions where Santal community is based, to facilitate land acquisition for educational facilities, while ensuring all tribal schools have essential amenities including electricity, clean water, accessible toilets, and digital infrastructure.

Effectiveness of various scholarship schemes run by the government, such as Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarships, National Overseas Scholarships, and National Fellowships for ST

students, which aim to reduce dropout rates and promote higher education, should be increased. More programs such as Adivasi Shiksha Rinn Yojana (ASRY) (National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation [NSTFDC], n.d.) that offer soft loans with interest subsidies for higher education should be implemented. Initiatives such as Development Action Plan for Scheduled Tribes (DAPST) (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, n.d.) and Tribal Research Institutes (TRIs) (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, n.d.) that contribute to overall welfare including education and support to tribal research should be made more effective.

Next, teacher training programs require reform to prioritize cultural competence, multilingual pedagogical approaches in Santali, and emotional intelligence, with incentives for teachers to reside within tribal communities and recruitment of local Santal individuals as educators to bridge linguistic and cultural gaps.

In addition, there are many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working for the well-being of Santali communities. The Badlao Foundation works at the grassroots level in Santali communities, Jharkhand, focusing on quality education and access to social security schemes, believing education is a fundamental right and a tool for social transformation (The Badlao Foundation, n.d.). They also have specific programs for empowering girls. The Samadhan Foundation, also operating in Santali communities, addresses education as one of its core issue areas, benefiting children, women, and adolescents (The Samadhan Foundation, n.d.). In order to make their efforts more effective, both the government and NGOs should make an effort to work together for education acknowledging each other's strength.

Finally, policy implementation must be strengthened through improved monitoring and evaluation frameworks to ensure constitutional provisions translate into ground realities, to eliminate discrimination against Santal and ST in general, and to assess regularly of existing programs like EMRS.

By adopting these comprehensive and context-specific strategies, stakeholders can move beyond merely providing access to schooling and instead cultivate an educational environment that truly empowers the Santal community, respects their unique cultural identity, and enables them to achieve their full potential.

6. Conclusion

The educational landscape for the Santal community is characterized by a complex interplay of progress and persistent challenges. While efforts have led to near-universal primary enrollment, the system struggles significantly with retention and progression to higher education. This leakage in the educational pipeline is primarily driven by deep-seated socio-economic pressures, a critical language barrier stemming from non-mother tongue instruction, a curriculum that often lacks cultural relevance, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of culturally competent teachers. Furthermore, the gap between well-intentioned policies and their effective implementation, coupled with instances of discrimination, exacerbates these issues. The prevalence of educated unemployment further undermines the perceived value of formal schooling, creating a paradoxical disincentive for families to invest in their children's education.

Despite these formidable barriers, community-led initiatives and the efforts of various NGOs demonstrate promising models for culturally appropriate and effective educational interventions. These examples underscore the potential for positive change when education is rooted in local contexts, respects linguistic diversity, and actively engages the community.

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