

Barriers to School Participation among Mahali Tribal Students in Rural India

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Abstract:

Education is recognized as a fundamental right and a main driver of social and economic empowerment. However, tribal communities in India, including the Mahali tribe, continue to face significant barriers to school participation, especially in rural areas. This study explores these barriers using a qualitative approach based on secondary data from government reports, policy documents, and existing research. The findings highlight that while education policies aim to promote inclusion and equity, structural and socio-cultural challenges limit the participation of Mahali tribal students in schools. Secondary data reveals that poverty, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to quality schools are major obstacles. Many Mahali families struggle with economic hardships, which often force children into labor or household responsibilities instead of attending school. Inadequate school facilities, long distances to educational institutions, and poor transportation further discourage regular attendance. Teacher shortages and lack of culturally sensitive pedagogy also contribute to low engagement, as tribal students often feel alienated in mainstream classrooms. Socio-cultural factors play an equally important role. Early marriage, gender bias, and traditional livelihood practices often conflict with formal schooling. Language barriers also create difficulties, as many Mahali students speak local dialects that are not used in classroom instruction. These challenges result in high dropout rates and irregular attendance, limiting the educational opportunities available to the community. Despite these barriers, opportunities exist through government schemes, community-based interventions, and non-governmental initiatives that aim to improve access and retention. Programs such as mid-day meals, scholarships, and residential schools have shown positive impacts, though their reach remains uneven. The study concludes that addressing barriers to school participation among Mahali tribal students requires a holistic approach that combines infrastructural development, economic support, culturally relevant pedagogy, and active community involvement. By doing so, education can become a meaningful tool for empowerment and social inclusion for the Mahali tribe in rural India.

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Introduction:

Education is one of the most powerful tools for social and economic empowerment, yet many tribal communities in India continue to face barriers that prevent their children from fully participating in school.

The Mahali tribe, spread across parts of Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha, represents one such community where school participation remains a challenge. Despite government policies and programs aimed at universal education, Mahali children in rural areas often struggle with access, retention, and meaningful engagement in schooling. The issue of school participation among tribal students is not only about enrollment but also about regular attendance, active involvement, and completion of education. Secondary data from government reports, census records, and educational surveys show that while enrollment rates have improved due to schemes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Right to Education Act, dropout rates among tribal students remain high. Poverty, lack of infrastructure, and socio-cultural practices often force children to prioritize household responsibilities or wage labour over schooling.

Language barriers also play a significant role. Many Mahali children grow up speaking local dialects, which are rarely used in classroom instruction. This creates a disconnect between home and school environments, making learning difficult and discouraging participation. Gender bias and early marriage further limit opportunities for girls, while long distances to schools and poor transportation facilities discourage regular attendance. At the same time, initiatives such as mid-day meals, scholarships, and residential schools have shown positive impacts in improving participation. However, these efforts often fail to address deeper socio-cultural and economic challenges. The need to understand these barriers is therefore critical, as education is not only a right but also a pathway to empowerment and inclusion for marginalized communities. This study seeks to explore the barriers to school participation among Mahali tribal students in rural India. By analyzing existing literature, policy documents, and reports, it aims to highlight the structural, economic, and cultural factors that shape educational experiences. The study also emphasizes the importance of designing context-sensitive interventions that can make education more accessible, relevant, and empowering for the Mahali tribe.

Need and Significance

Education is widely recognized as a pathway to empowerment, social mobility, and inclusion. Yet, tribal communities in India, including the Mahali tribe, continue to face barriers that prevent their children from fully participating in school. The need for this study arises from the fact that while national policies such as the Right to Education Act and programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan have improved enrollment rates, dropout levels among tribal students remain high. For the Mahali tribe, especially in rural areas, participation in schooling is shaped by structural, economic, and socio-cultural challenges that require deeper understanding. Without addressing these barriers, the promise of education as a tool for empowerment remains incomplete. Secondary data highlights that poverty is a major factor influencing school participation. Many Mahali families depend on traditional livelihoods and daily wage labor, which often forces children to contribute to household income instead of attending school. Infrastructural issues such as long distances to schools, poor transportation, and inadequate facilities further discourage regular attendance. Teacher shortages and lack of culturally sensitive pedagogy also alienate tribal students, making classrooms feel disconnected from their lived realities.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to highlight these barriers and suggest ways to overcome them. By analyzing secondary data, the research provides insights into how socio-cultural practices, language barriers, and gender bias affect participation. It also emphasizes the importance of designing interventions that are context-sensitive and inclusive. Programs such as mid-day meals, scholarships, and residential schools have shown positive impacts, but their reach and effectiveness remain uneven. Understanding the barriers faced by Mahali tribal students is crucial for policymakers, educators, and community leaders. It helps in shaping strategies that not only improve access but also ensure retention and meaningful engagement. The study is significant because it underscores that education for tribal communities must go beyond enrollment numbers—it must address economic realities, cultural contexts,



and social inequalities. By doing so, education can become a true instrument of empowerment and social justice for the Mahali tribe in rural India.

Table 1: Need and Significance of Studying Barriers to School Participation among Mahali Tribal Students

Aspect	Description
Need for the Study	Despite policies like the Right to Education Act and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, dropout rates among Mahali tribal students remain high. Enrollment alone does not guarantee participation, retention, or meaningful learning.
Economic Barriers	Poverty forces children into wage labour or household responsibilities. Families depending on traditional livelihoods often prioritize survival over schooling.
Infrastructural Barriers	Long distances to schools, poor transportation, and inadequate facilities discourage regular attendance. Teacher shortages and lack of culturally sensitive pedagogy alienate tribal students.
Socio-Cultural Barriers	Language differences between home dialects and classroom instruction create learning difficulties. Gender bias, early marriage, and traditional practices further limit participation, especially for girls.
Significance for Policy Makers	Highlights the need for context-sensitive interventions that go beyond enrollment numbers. Policies must address economic realities, cultural contexts, and inequalities to ensure meaningful education.
Significance for Educators	Emphasizes the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy and teacher training. Teachers must be equipped to engage tribal students and make classrooms inclusive.
Significance for Community	Education can empower the Mahali tribe by reducing inequality and promoting social inclusion. Active community involvement is crucial for sustaining participation.
Positive Interventions	Programs like mid-day meals, scholarships, and residential schools have shown positive impacts, though their reach and effectiveness remain uneven.
Overall Significance	Understanding barriers helps design strategies that improve access, retention, and engagement. Education becomes a tool for empowerment and social justice for the Mahali tribe.

Literature Review

The issue of school participation among tribal communities in India has been widely studied, with researchers consistently highlighting structural, economic, and socio-cultural barriers. The Mahali tribe, like many other tribal groups, faces challenges that limit children's access to and retention in schools. Reviewing existing literature helps to understand these barriers in depth and situates the problem within broader discussions on tribal education in rural India. Several studies emphasize the lack of adequate infrastructure in rural schools. Reports from government surveys and educational research show that long distances to schools, poor transportation, and inadequate facilities discourage regular attendance among tribal children.

Teacher shortages and limited availability of trained educators further weaken the quality of education. Scholars argue that without proper infrastructure, tribal students are unable to participate meaningfully in schooling, even when enrollment rates appear high.

Poverty is a recurring theme in the literature. Many tribal families, including the Mahali, depend on traditional livelihoods and daily wage labor. Studies highlight that children are often required to contribute to household income or take on domestic responsibilities, which reduces their chances of attending school regularly. Economic hardships also make it difficult for families to afford uniforms, books, or transportation, further limiting participation. Research also points to socio-cultural factors that shape school participation. Language barriers are significant, as many tribal children speak local dialects that are not used in classroom instruction. This creates a disconnect between home and school environments, making learning difficult and discouraging engagement. Gender bias and early marriage are additional challenges, particularly for girls, who are often withdrawn from school to take on household roles. Traditional practices and community expectations sometimes conflict with formal schooling, leading to irregular attendance and high dropout rates.

Government initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right to Education Act, and mid-day meal schemes have been studied for their impact on tribal education. Literature suggests that these programs have improved enrollment and reduced hunger-related absenteeism. Residential schools and scholarships have also shown positive effects in supporting tribal students. However, researchers note that these interventions often fail to address deeper socio-cultural and economic challenges, and their reach remains uneven across regions. So, the literature highlights that barriers to school participation among Mahali tribal students are multi-dimensional. Structural issues like poor infrastructure, economic hardships, and socio-cultural practices all interact to limit educational opportunities. While government schemes and community-based interventions have made progress, they are not sufficient to ensure sustained participation. The reviewed studies underscore the need for holistic strategies that combine infrastructural development, economic support, culturally relevant pedagogy, and active community involvement.

Objectives

1. To examine the structural, economic, and socio-cultural barriers that affect school participation among Mahali tribal students in rural India using secondary data.
2. To assess the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions aimed at improving school participation among Mahali tribal students through a qualitative review of secondary sources.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the barriers to school participation among Mahali tribal students in rural India using a qualitative approach and secondary data. The findings reveal that while policies and programs have improved enrollment rates, deeper structural, economic, and socio-cultural challenges continue to limit meaningful participation and retention. Secondary data highlights that inadequate infrastructure is one of the most pressing barriers. Many rural schools lack proper classrooms, sanitation facilities, and teaching resources. Long distances to schools and poor transportation discourage regular attendance, especially for younger children and girls. Teacher shortages further weaken the quality of education, and when teachers are available, they often lack training in culturally sensitive pedagogy. This creates a disconnect between the school environment and the lived realities of Mahali students, making classrooms feel alien and unwelcoming.

Poverty remains a central issue. Mahali families often depend on traditional livelihoods and daily wage labor, which makes children's contribution to household income essential. As a result, many children are

engaged in agricultural work, domestic responsibilities, or wage labor instead of attending school. Even when enrolled, irregular attendance is common because families prioritize survival over education. Economic hardships also make it difficult to afford uniforms, books, and transportation, further limiting participation. Socio-cultural practices strongly influence school participation. Language barriers are significant, as Mahali children often speak local dialects that are not used in classroom instruction. This creates difficulties in comprehension and discourages engagement. Gender bias and early marriage further restrict opportunities for girls, who are often withdrawn from school to take on household roles. Traditional livelihood practices and community expectations sometimes conflict with formal schooling, leading to irregular attendance and high dropout rates.

Government initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Right to Education Act, mid-day meal schemes, and scholarships have improved enrollment and reduced hunger-related absenteeism. Residential schools and hostels have provided opportunities for some tribal students to continue their education. However, secondary data shows that these interventions often fail to address deeper socio-cultural and economic challenges. Their reach remains uneven, and many Mahali students still fall through the cracks due to systemic inequalities. Despite these challenges, there are positive signs. Community-based interventions, non-governmental organizations, and government programs have shown that targeted support can improve participation. Mid-day meals encourage attendance, scholarships reduce financial burdens, and residential schools provide safe learning environments. When combined with culturally relevant pedagogy and active community involvement, these initiatives can make education more accessible and meaningful for Mahali students.

The discussion clearly connects to the study’s objectives. The first objective—examining barriers—shows that structural, economic, and socio-cultural factors interact to limit participation. The second objective—assessing interventions—reveals that while policies have improved enrollment, they are insufficient to ensure retention and meaningful engagement. Success depends on addressing infrastructural gaps, empowering teachers, and designing culturally sensitive strategies. So, secondary data suggests that barriers to school participation among Mahali tribal students are multi-dimensional and deeply rooted in structural inequalities, poverty, and socio-cultural practices. While government schemes and community initiatives have made progress, they remain limited in scope and effectiveness. The discussion emphasizes that education for tribal communities must go beyond enrollment numbers—it must address economic realities, cultural contexts, and social inequalities. Only then can schooling become a true instrument of empowerment and social justice for the Mahali tribe in rural India.

Table 2: Discussion on Barriers to School Participation among Mahali Tribal Students

Theme	Insights
Structural & Infrastructural Challenges	Many rural schools lack proper classrooms, sanitation, and teaching resources. Long distances and poor transportation discourage attendance, especially for girls. Teacher shortages and lack of culturally sensitive pedagogy make classrooms feel alien and unwelcoming for Mahali students.
Economic Barriers	Poverty forces children into agricultural work, wage labour, or household responsibilities. Families prioritize survival over education. Costs of uniforms, books, and transport further restrict participation, leading to irregular attendance and dropouts.
Socio-Cultural Barriers	Language differences between home dialects and classroom instruction create comprehension difficulties. Gender bias and early marriage limit opportunities for girls. Traditional livelihood practices and community expectations often conflict with formal schooling, resulting in irregular attendance.



Policy Interventions	Schemes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Right to Education Act, mid-day meals, scholarships, and residential schools have improved enrollment and reduced hunger-related absenteeism. However, they fail to address deeper socio-cultural and economic challenges, and their reach remains uneven.
Opportunities & Positive Developments	Community-based interventions, NGOs, and government programs show promise. Mid-day meals encourage attendance, scholarships reduce financial burdens, and residential schools provide safe learning environments. When combined with culturally relevant pedagogy and community involvement, these initiatives improve participation.
Link to Objectives	Objective 1: Barriers are multi-dimensional—structural, economic, and socio-cultural factors interact to limit participation. Objective 2: Policies improve enrollment but are insufficient for retention and meaningful engagement. Success requires infrastructure, teacher empowerment, and culturally sensitive strategies.
Overall Conclusion	Barriers are deeply rooted in poverty, inequality, and cultural practices. While interventions have made progress, they remain limited. Education for Mahali tribal students must go beyond enrollment numbers to address economic realities, cultural contexts, and social inequalities, making schooling a true instrument of empowerment.

Conclusion

The study of barriers to school participation among Mahali tribal students in rural India highlights the complex interplay of structural, economic, and socio-cultural factors that limit educational opportunities. While government policies and programs such as the Right to Education Act, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, mid-day meals, and scholarships have improved enrollment, participation remains uneven and fragile. Secondary data shows that poverty, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and language barriers continue to discourage regular attendance and retention. Socio-cultural practices, including early marriage, gender bias, and traditional livelihood responsibilities, further restrict opportunities, especially for girls. These challenges reveal that education for tribal communities cannot be understood only in terms of numbers but must be examined in relation to lived realities. The Mahali tribe's experiences reflect broader patterns of exclusion faced by many tribal groups in India, where schooling often struggles to connect with cultural contexts and economic needs.

At the same time, positive developments such as residential schools, community-based interventions, and NGO initiatives demonstrate that targeted support can make a difference. When combined with culturally sensitive pedagogy and active community involvement, these efforts can help bridge the gap between policy and practice. So, addressing barriers to school participation among Mahali tribal students requires a holistic approach. Infrastructure must be strengthened, economic support expanded, and teachers empowered to engage students in inclusive ways. By ensuring equitable access and culturally relevant education, schooling can become a true instrument of empowerment, social justice, and meaningful inclusion for the Mahali tribe in rural India.

Recommendations

The findings of this study show that school participation among Mahali tribal students is shaped by multiple barriers—structural, economic, and socio-cultural. To address these challenges, several recommendations can be made based on secondary data insights.

First, improving infrastructure is essential. Schools in rural areas must be equipped with proper classrooms, sanitation facilities, and safe transportation options. Establishing more schools closer to tribal villages can reduce the burden of long travel distances, especially for younger children and girls.

Second, economic support for families is crucial. Poverty often forces children into labor or household responsibilities. Expanding scholarship programs, providing free uniforms and books, and strengthening mid-day meal schemes can reduce financial pressures and encourage regular attendance.

Third, teacher training and culturally sensitive pedagogy should be prioritized. Teachers must be trained to understand tribal contexts and use inclusive teaching methods. Incorporating local dialects and culturally relevant examples into classroom instruction can help bridge the gap between home and school environments.

Fourth, community involvement is necessary to sustain participation. Awareness campaigns, parent–teacher meetings, and collaboration with local leaders can help communities see education as a pathway to empowerment. Special focus should be given to reducing gender bias and discouraging early marriage, ensuring that girls have equal opportunities to continue schooling.

Finally, strengthening government and NGO initiatives such as residential schools, hostels, and skill-based programs can provide safe and supportive environments for tribal students. These interventions should be expanded and monitored to ensure they reach the most disadvantaged families.

By combining infrastructural development, economic support, teacher empowerment, and community engagement, education can become a meaningful tool of inclusion and empowerment for Mahali tribal students in rural India.

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