Overcoming Educational Barriers: Analyzing Root Causes and Solutions for Gender Disparity in Adivasi Education

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Abstract:- **This paper examines the current state of the gender gap in literacy rates and school education among Adivasi populations in India. Despite significant progress in overall literacy rates in recent decades, Adivasi communities, particularly Adivasi girls, continue to lag behind. We analyze the latest data from the Census of India, National Family Health Surveys, and other government reports to quantify the extent of the gender gap in literacy and school enrollment, attendance, and dropout rates among major Adivasi groups across different states. Root causes including poverty, lack of access to schools, cultural norms, early marriage, and lack of female teachers are explored. The paper also reviews recent government initiatives and welfare schemes aimed at promoting education of Adivasi girls and reducing gender disparity. Based on the analysis, targeted policy recommendations are made to accelerate progress in closing the gender gap and ensuring basic school education for all Adivasi girls in India.**

Keywords:- Adivasi Education; Gender Gap; Literacy Rate; School Enrollment; Girls' Education; India.

I. INTRODUCTION

The education of girls and women is widely recognized as a critical driver for social and economic development. Better educated women have fewer children, provide better healthcare and education to their children, and contribute to higher family incomes (UNICEF, 2018). This is especially important for historically marginalized communities such as Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India, who have significantly lower educational and socio-economic indicators compared to the general population.

As per the 2011 Census, the ST population in India was 104 million, constituting 8.6% of the total population (Ministry of Adivasi Affairs, 2013). Despite affirmative action policies enshrined in the Constitution, Adivasis continue to be one of the most deprived and marginalized socio-economic groups in the country. Adivasi girls in particular face the double disadvantage of gender and ethnicity, reflected in their lower literacy rates and poorer educational outcomes compared to Adivasi boys and non-Adivasi girls.

This paper reviews the current state of school education among Adivasi girls in India, with a focus on the gender gap in literacy rates. It analyzes the latest data to quantify the extent of the problem, examines the underlying causes, evaluates existing government and non-government interventions to address the issue, and provides recommendations for accelerating progress. Section 2 looks at the historical context and background of Adivasi education in India. Section 3 analyzes recent trends in key educational statistics for Adivasi boys and girls. Section 4 explores the major barriers and challenges faced by Adivasi girls in accessing quality school education. Section 5 reviews government policies and welfare schemes aimed at promoting education for ST children, particularly girls. Section 6 presents case studies of notable NGO-led interventions in Adivasi areas. Finally, Section 7 concludes with a summary of findings and policy recommendations.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The British colonial administration in India was the first to create a framework for providing education to ST communities. The first formal schools for STs were set up by Christian missionaries in the early 19th century (Maharatna, A., 2005). However, the provision of education was limited and mostly benefited Adivasi boys rather than girls. After India's independence, the Constitution directed the state to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of STs and protect them from social injustice and exploitation.

The National Policy on Education 1986 and its Plan of Action 1992 gave further impetus to ST education. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) launched in 2000 made special provisions for the education of ST children, including free textbooks, uniforms, stationery, and scholarships for girls (Ministry of Education, 2020). The

Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 made elementary education a fundamental right for all children aged 6-14 years. However, despite these progressive policy actions, the educational status of Adivasi children, especially girls, continues to be an area of concern.

III. RECENT TRENDS IN EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS

A. Literacy Rates

Table 1 Shows the Literacy rates for the General Population and STs
Disaggregated by Gender from the last Four Decennial Censuses of India

General Population Literacy Rate				
Years	**1981**	**1991**	**2001**	**2011**
Total	43.6	52.2	64.8	73.0
Male	56.4	64.1	75.3	80.9
Female	29.8	39.3	53.7	64.6
Gender Gap	26.6	24.8	21.6	16.3
Scheduled Tribes Literacy Rate				
Total	16.4	29.6	47.1	59.0
Male	24.5	40.7	59.2	68.5
Female	8.0	18.2	34.8	49.4
Gender Gap	16.5	22.5	24.4	19.1

Sources: Census of India 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011 [5-8]

The data shows significant improvements in ST literacy rates over the 30-year period, with the overall rate rising from a low 16.4% in 1981 to 59% in 2011. However, these rates are still considerably lower than that of the general population. In 2011, the literacy rate for the total population was 73%, compared to 59% for STs, a gap of 14 percentage points.

The gender gap in literacy rate among STs has remained higher than the national average. In 2011, the gender gap for the general population was 16.3 percentage points, while that for STs was 19.1 points. Encouragingly

though, the gender gap for both groups has declined over time.

B. Gross Enrollment Ratios

Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is defined as the total enrollment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012).

Table 2 presents GERs for STs at the primary, upper primary and secondary levels over the last 15 years.

Table 2 Gross Enrollment Ratios for Scheduled Tribes by level of education and gender, India, 2004-05 to 2018-19

Primary (I-V)				
Level of Education	**2004-05**	**2009-10**	**2014-15**	**2018-19**
Total	97.1	119.7	109.4	105.7
Boys	104.0	125.0	111.0	105.3
Girls	90.0	114.1	107.8	106.1
Gender Gap	14.0	10.9	3.2	-0.8
Upper Primary (VI-VIII)				
Total	62.0	75.3	88.5	99.4
Boys	72.1	81.8	91.3	100.2
Girls	51.4	68.5	85.4	98.6
Gender Gap	20.7	13.3	5.9	1.6
Secondary (IX-X)				
Total	32.5	45.8	70.3	80.4
Boys	40.8	52.7	76.5	84.1
Girls	23.6	38.5	63.8	76.5
Gender Gap	17.2	14.2	12.7	7.6

Sources: Statistics of School Education Reports, MHRD

The data indicates impressive increases in enrollment at all levels of school education for ST children over the past 15 years. At the primary level, GERs are now over 100% for both ST boys and girls, indicating that age-appropriate enrollment has been achieved. GERs at the upper primary level increased from 62% in 2004-05 to 99.4% in 2018-19. Secondary level GER, while still lagging behind at 80.4%, has more than doubled over the period.

Importantly, the gender gaps in GERs at all levels have seen a consistent decline. At the primary level, girls have caught up and even surpassed boys in the latest year. Gender gaps at the upper primary and secondary levels have also reduced considerably. This represents significant progress in improving access to school education for Adivasi girls.

C. Dropout Rates

The Dropout Rate is the percentage of students who drop out from a given grade or cycle or level of education in a given school year (MHRD, 2018). Table 3 shows the latest dropout rates for ST students at different stages of school education.

Table 3 Dropout Rates for Scheduled Tribes by level of education and gender, India, 2017-18

Level	Total (%)	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
Primary (I-V)	6.9	6.3	7.5
Elementary (I-VIII)	19.6	19.1	20.3
Secondary (I-X)	31.3	31.4	31.2

Source: Educational Statistics at a Glance 2018, MHRD

The data shows that while dropout rates for ST student's increase with each level of education, the gender differences are relatively small. At the primary level, the dropout rate for ST girls is 1.2 percentage points higher than that of ST boys. This gap increases slightly to 1.2 points at the elementary level. However, at the secondary level, ST girls have a marginally lower dropout rate than ST boys.

IV. BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Despite the progress made, Adivasi girls continue to face multiple barriers in accessing quality school education. Some of the key challenges are:

➢ *Poverty and Livelihood Pressures*
High levels of poverty and lack of stable livelihoods often lead to ST households prioritizing their limited resources for the education of sons over daughters. Girls are expected to help with domestic chores, sibling care and contribute to family income, resulting in irregular attendance and early dropouts (Sahu, K. S., 2014).

➢ *Lack of Access to Schools*
Many remote Adivasi villages still lack primary and upper primary schools within walking distance. At the secondary level, ST girls have to travel longer distances to access schools, often through difficult terrain and unsafe environments. Lack of transport facilities and seasonal migration also impact their attendance and learning (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2014)

➢ *Inadequate School Infrastructure and Facilities*
Schools in Adivasi areas often lack basic facilities like classrooms, toilets, drinking water, and boundary walls. Lack of separate girls' toilets poses a major barrier for adolescent girls. Many schools also do not have female teachers, which discourages parents from sending their daughters (Burra, N., 2020).

➢ *Gender Discrimination and Safety Concerns*
Patriarchal gender norms in Adivasi communities lead to undervaluing of girls' education. A concern around safety and security of girls traveling to schools, especially after puberty, also contributes to their early dropout. Sexual harassment and abuse by male students and teachers is a major factor (IIPS & ICF 2017).

➢ *Early Marriage and Motherhood*
Adivasi girls often marry at a young age due to cultural traditions and socio-economic compulsions. Early marriage almost always leads to girls dropping out of school. The pressure to bear children soon after marriage also acts as a barrier to continuing their education (Xaxa, V., 2014).

➢ *Low Learning Outcomes*
ST students, especially girls, tend to have lower learning levels compared to their non-Adivasi peers. Discrimination at school, lack of parental support, difficulties with non-native languages of instruction, teacher absenteeism and poor quality of teaching contribute to poor learning outcomes, leading to disinterest and eventual dropping out (ASER Centre, 2019).

➢ *Health related Problems:*

• *Public and Private Initiatives*
The Government of India implements several schemes and programs aimed at promote education among STs and reducing gender disparities. Some of the key initiatives are:

• *Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)*
EMRS are set up in blocks with 50% or more ST population and 20,000 or more Adivasi persons to provide quality upper primary, secondary and senior secondary education to ST students, with focus on girls. As of 2019-20, there were 438 EMRS schools operational across the country (Ministry of Adivasi Affairs, 2020).

- *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs)*

KGBVs are residential upper primary schools for girls from disadvantaged groups including STs in educationally backward blocks. KGBVs provide free boarding, lodging, uniforms, textbooks and stipends to girls. As of 2019-20, 3,703 KGBVs were operational, benefiting 352,000 girls (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020).

- *National Scheme of Incentive to Girls for Secondary Education (NSIGSE)*

The NSIGSE aims to improve enrollment and retention of ST girls in secondary education. It provides a one-time incentive of Rs. 3,000 to ST girls who enroll in grade 9 and continue their studies at least till grade 12 (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2020).

- *Post-Metric Scholarship (PMS)*

Scheme for STs the PMS scheme provides financial assistance to ST students for pursuing higher education after matriculation. There is a special focus on girls by providing them higher rates of scholarship. In 2019-20, 1.86 million ST students received post-metric scholarships (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020).

- *Mid-Day Meal (MDM)*

Scheme The MDM scheme aims to enhance enrollment, retention and attendance by providing free lunch to all students at elementary level. Many ST girls benefit from this scheme, which addresses classroom hunger and acts as an incentive for poor families to send their daughters to school (MHRD, 2020).

V. NOTABLE NGO INTERVENTIONS

Several NGOs work closely with Adivasi communities to supplement government efforts and provide innovative solutions for educating girls. A few successful interventions are highlighted below:

- *Educate Girls (Rajasthan)*

Educate Girls mobilizes communities and volunteers to boost girls' enrollment and retention in government schools across 13 districts of Rajasthan, many with sizable Adivasi populations. Its remedial learning programs and digital learning materials have helped improve learning outcomes for over 1.3 million girls since 2007 (Educate Girls, 2018).

- *Barefoot College (Rajasthan)*

Barefoot College has been providing quality residential schooling to rural and Adivasi children, especially girls, since 1975. Its Shiksha Niketan schools use innovative pedagogy, solar-powered digital learning tools, and focus on preserving local art and culture. The schools have educated over 75,000 girls and achieved a dropout rate of less than 5% (Barefoot College, 2020).

- *Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (Odisha)*

KISS is the largest residential institute in the world providing free holistic education to over 30,000 Adivasi children, with a 50-50 enrollment ratio of boys and girls. Its schools have achieved a near 100% retention rate at elementary level and a college placement rate of 95% for disadvantaged Adivasi girls (KISS, 2021).

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This review paper has examined the current state of the gender gap in literacy and school education among Adivasi communities in India. The analysis of educational statistics reveals that while there has been significant progress in improving access and reducing gender disparities for Adivasi girls over the past few decades, they continue to lag behind their male counterparts and non-Adivasi girls on most indicators.

The literacy rate for ST girls stood at 49.4% in 2011, compared to 68.5% for ST boys and 64.6% for all girls in the country. Gross enrollment ratios at the elementary level have reached over 100% for ST girls, nearly closing the gender gap. However, the gap remains significant at the secondary level. Dropout rates for ST girls, while similar to ST boys, are much higher compared to non-Adivasi girls, especially at the secondary level.

Adivasi girls face a complex set of barriers and challenges in pursuing their education. Poverty, lack of access to schools, inadequate infrastructure and facilities, gender discrimination, early marriage, and low learning outcomes all contribute to their exclusion and dropout. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these underlying inequities and vulnerabilities.

The Government of India implements several schemes and programs to promote ST education, with a special focus on girls. Initiatives like EMRS, KGBVs, incentives for secondary education, post-matric scholarships, and the mid-day meal scheme have helped improve access and retention to some extent. However, their coverage and quality remain inadequate relative to the scale of the problem.

Many NGOs also work closely with Adivasi communities to supplement government efforts and provide targeted interventions for girls' education. Several initiatives have demonstrated success in improving enrollment, retention, and learning outcomes for ST girls through residential schooling, remedial education, community mobilization, and leveraging technology. However, such interventions remain limited in their scale and geographic coverage.

Based on the analysis of the current situation, challenges, and existing interventions, the following recommendations are made to accelerate progress towards closing the gender gap in ST education:

- Expand coverage and quality of EMRS and KGBVs in Adivasi areas, with a focus on educationally backward blocks with high ST populations. Ensure adequate number of female teachers, gender-sensitive infrastructure and facilities, and inclusive learning environments in these schools.

- Increase the amounts of monetary incentives for secondary education of ST girls under the NSIGSE scheme and expand its eligibility criteria to cover more disadvantaged girls. Improve the coverage, timeliness of delivery, and monitoring of post-matric scholarships for ST girls.
- Strengthen community mobilization efforts to change patriarchal attitudes and promote positive norms around valuing girls' education in Adivasi areas. Engage with Adivasi leaders, parents, and youth groups to create awareness about the importance of girls completing secondary education and delaying marriage.
- Leverage technology to provide access to quality learning content in local languages and dialects for Adivasi students, especially girls. Provide free digital devices and internet connectivity to teachers and students in remote Adivasi areas to ensure continuity of learning, even during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Invest in building the capacities of teachers in Adivasi areas to provide inclusive and gender-responsive pedagogy, especially for teaching in multi-lingual and multi-grade settings. Provide incentives for female teachers to work in remote Adivasi schools and act as role models for girls.
- Establish residential schools and learning centers for specific Adivasi groups, especially Particularly Vulnerable Adivasi Groups (PVTGs), who are the most marginalized. Provide culturally relevant education, bridge courses, and vocational training to help mainstream out-of-school girls back into formal education.
- Foster greater collaboration and convergence between relevant government departments like Adivasi welfare, education, health, and women and child development to provide holistic support to Adivasi girls' education. Create joint programs and share resources to address the multiple deprivations faced by Adivasi communities.
- Partner with NGOs and civil society organizations working on Adivasi education to scale up successful interventions for girls' education. Promote cross-learning and sharing of best practices across different Adivasi contexts. Provide flexible funding and technical support to NGOs to innovate and adapt their models.

In conclusion, closing the gender gap in literacy and school education among Adivasi communities in India is crucial for the country's overall social and economic development. While progress has been made, much more needs to be done to ensure that every Adivasi girl has access to quality education and can realize her full potential. A concerted effort by the government, civil society, and Adivasi communities themselves is needed to address the underlying challenges and create an enabling environment for Adivasi girls to succeed. By investing in the education of Adivasi girls, we can break the inter-generational cycle of poverty and marginalization, and build a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Literacy Rates for Scheduled Tribes by State/UT and Gender, India, 2011

State/UT	Total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Gender Gap (%)
Andhra Pradesh	49.2	59.3	39.1	20.2
Arunachal Pradesh	64.6	71.5	57.4	14.1
Assam	72.1	78.6	65.1	13.5
Bihar	51.1	61.8	39.6	22.2
Chhattisgarh	59.1	70.7	47.6	23.1
Gujarat	62.5	71.7	53.2	18.5
Himachal Pradesh	73.6	83.0	64.3	18.7
Jammu & Kashmir	50.6	60.6	39.7	20.9
Jharkhand	57.1	68.2	46.2	22.0
Karnataka	62.1	70.8	53.3	17.5
Kerala	75.8	80.8	71.1	9.7
Madhya Pradesh	50.6	59.6	41.5	18.1
Maharashtra	65.7	73.9	57.4	16.5
Manipur	72.6	78.9	66.4	12.5
Meghalaya	74.5	76.0	73.0	3.0
Mizoram	91.5	93.7	89.4	4.3
Nagaland	80.0	83.3	76.7	6.6
Odisha	52.2	63.7	41.2	22.5
Rajasthan	52.1	66.6	37.3	29.3
Sikkim	79.7	85.6	73.3	12.3
Tamil Nadu	54.3	62.7	46.1	16.6
Tripura	79.1	85.0	72.8	12.2
Uttarakhand	73.9	85.0	62.4	22.6
West Bengal	57.9	68.2	47.0	21.2
Andaman & Nicobar	65.9	73.3	58.0	15.3
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	62.6	71.8	52.6	19.2
Daman & Diu	75.2	83.6	65.5	18.1
Lakshadweep	91.7	95.6	87.9	7.7
India	59.0	68.5	49.4	19.1

Source: Census of India 2011