

In Pursuit of Education: Why Some Tribal Girls Continue and Others Dropout of Schools in Rural India?

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Abstract

This research focus on the barriers and facilitators of accessing primary and secondary education among the tribal girls in the hinterlands of India. Using ethnographic approach, this study provides a narrative of the girls belonging to the Oraon tribe on what enables or prohibits them to successfully complete their education. The findings reveal that the economic hardships of parents, early arranged or love marriages and the absence of role models in the village affect the perceived value and relevance of education. On the other hand, competent teachers, the use of local language, local relevance of syllabus, stable family income and parental support played a crucial role in facilitating the successful completion of the girls' education. The article applies the theoretical framework of ecological systems theory to better understand the proximal and distal personal and societal factors that determine the dropout rate of the tribal girls in the formal education system.

Keywords

Scheduled Tribe, tribal girls, education, dropout, India

Introduction

Increasing girls' presence in education is widely accepted as advantageous to both the individuals and communities and serve as an indicator of social justice (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006). However, due to gender disparity, cultural issues and disadvantageous socio-economic position of parents, the female literacy levels tend to be dismally low in various South Asian societies (Cairns et al., 2014). In several countries, even if there is accessibility to formal educational institutes, the dropout rates of girls tend to be higher than of the boys (Barone, 2011; Carvalho, 2015). However, post 2015, planned and focused interventions in the direction of imparting primary education to girls have reduced the dropout rate for girls, leading to a better gender parity in secondary schools (Rose, 2015). In India too, several central and state government policies (such as mid-day meals, direct cash transfers for buying books and stationery,

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provision of bicycles to female students, etc.) have been devised to boost participation and successful completion of primary and secondary education for girls. While the enrollment and retention of girl students have relatively improved, the success stories are mostly concentrated in the mainstream communities of India. According to National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2010), the literacy rate among the Scheduled Tribes (STs) of India is 63.1%, which is significantly lower than the national literacy rate (i.e., 72.8%; Census, 2011).

Extant studies have identified how girls belonging to different communities in India face disadvantages, which are rooted in the macro-societal factors such as remote geographical location and limited economic opportunities (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013; Sen et al., 2009). However, there is limited research, which examines the factors that contribute to stagnation or decline in the educational status of ST girls both at primary and secondary levels. There have been calls for research projects ‘that delve beyond broad categorisations (“girls”, “Scheduled Caste”, “Scheduled Tribes”, etc.) to investigate the individual, qualitative circumstances of excluded children within these groups’ (Arnold, 2015, p. 714). With the intention to address the tribal girls’ low participation and high dropout rates in schools, it is necessary to understand the social and cultural barriers or facilitators that restrict or enable the tribal girls to attend and successfully complete the primary or secondary level education. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to understand and uncover the underlying factors that facilitate or become barriers for the tribal girls in attaining the secondary school level education in one of the less developed and tribal dominated state (of Jharkhand) in India. The study has two-fold objectives; first, to understand the social and cultural factors that act as either a barrier or facilitator of tribal girl’s education, and second, to identify the shortcomings in the extant educational and social inclusion policies that does not specifically consider the context specific cultural and social realities of the tribal girls.

Background: Gender and Education in Mainstream and Tribal Societies

The value of educating the younger generations is undisputed and is considered a vital investment in developing the nation’s human capital and economic growth and in raising the standards of living for individuals (Idris, 2003). For the girls, other than participating in economic activities, education is known to impart confidence and improve their decision-making abilities related to maintenance of resources, health and family well-being (Richards et al., 2013). For instance, girls in societies with low-educational attainment tend to experience early pregnancy, childbirth complications along with increased risk for maternal and infant morbidity and mortality (Santhya, 2011; WHO, 2014). In India, interventions such as provision of scholarships and bicycles for girl students along with more generic mid-day meal schemes in schools have mobilized higher enrollment as well as retention of the girl students (Shain, 2013).

Existing researchers have focused on differential outcomes of education for boys and girls and have identified various socio-economic reasons to explain the higher dropout rates of the girls. In India, the All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE; Government of India, 2019) report observed that out of 37.4 million enrollments in higher education, 18.2 million students were females. In addition, the report noted an increase of 4.6% in the enrollment levels of female students, which was considered as a positive development. While higher enrollment levels of girls are encouraging, studies have highlighted that due to gendered notions prevalent in society, several girls face gender discrimination and unequal treatment, which hampers their participation in learning process (Stromquist, 2007). The following section outlines the social and cultural factors that hamper or facilitate girls’ education in different societies.

Gender and Education in India: Reasons for Low Participation and Retention of Girls in Primary/Secondary Education

Researchers have identified multiple intersecting and mutually reinforcing disadvantages for girls in terms of having access to the educational infrastructure that are on offer. Gender discrimination and its role in differential attainment of educational credentials for boys and girls have been studied in the extant literature (Sonawane, 2014; Sujatha, 2008). The primary reason behind such disparity was attributed to social and economic factors, where the limited financial resources were channeled in favour of the boys. Moreover, the prevalent patriarchal norms and gender specific attribution of work determines how boys and girls socialize and imbibe gender specific norms. Girls in India grow within the shadows of a gendered society, where both women and girls are expected to behave in manner that does not bring embarrassment for themselves and their family members (Bhagavatheeswaran et al., 2016).

Different STs in India have their unique socio-cultural practices, religious traditions, languages, customs, rituals, beliefs and ways of living (Munshi, 2013), and often, the tribal students find it a bit difficult to blend with different cultural settings, language, beliefs and way of living. Researchers have studied the efficacy of various educational initiatives in the tribal regions of India and have identified reasons for low levels of education among the tribals (see, e.g., Pradhan, 2011; Sahu, 2014). Factors such as poverty, lack of awareness among parents and students, family issues, language barrier and socio-economic inequalities emerged as key obstacles in attaining higher educational credentials in tribal communities (Punnaiah, 2018).

While the above-mentioned studies do explore the challenges for tribal communities in accessing higher education, it does not exclusively deal with the case of young tribal girls in a remote (rural) setting, whose social and cultural context is different than a tribal student situated in an urban setting. Several studies tend to club both the boys and girls accounts together and do not provide a nuanced understanding of what role does gender play in shaping the educational attainment of a tribal girl. Moreover, existing studies are biased towards studying the barriers in attaining education, without paying a similar attention on identifying the potential enablers. In order to address the research gaps, this study takes the case of tribal girls from Gokulpur village in the underdeveloped district of Gumla in Jharkhand, India.

Conceptual Framework: The Ecological Systems Theory and Educational Attainment

The ecological systems theory (1979), developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner could be useful conceptual anchor for this study. The ecological systems theory identifies the role of various factors that shape up the process of growth and development of the individuals within the larger ecosystem in which they are a part of. The theory postulates four layers of environment, viz. microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem, within which an individual is nested. The most proximal environment is the microsystem, where an individual's immediate and regular contacts, such as parents, siblings and peer groups, at school would interact and directly influence the individual's behaviour, perception, interest and activities that later shapes the individual's interest in education.

The second layer of environment is the mesosystem, which refers to interconnections between several microsystems prevailing in the society. For instance, the interactions between students, teachers and parents could be considered as a mesosystem as it involved various micro-entities coming together and interacting with each other. In a mesosystem, there is bi-directional flow of influences and information is mutually exchanged. It is a cultural milieu where individuals with different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds share a common space and mutually influence each other's thought process.

Table 1. Application of Ecological System Framework in Tribal Education

Factors	Description	Examples
Microsystem	Individual factors	Age, interest and aspirations of an individual
Mesosystem	Social factors, cultural factors	Socio-economic conditions of parents/ family members, which will influence level of engagement for girls in getting formal education
Exosystem	Adjustment problems for tribal girls in the culture and ethos taught at school	Difficulty in interacting with non-tribal students, stigma and discrimination by peers and teachers
Chronosystem	Long-term education policy and interventions prevailing in the region	Mid-day meal scheme, incentives for attaining different levels of education

Source: Compiled by the authors from the literature using the ecological systems framework by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2005).

The third environmental layer is the exosystem, and it encompasses events, contingencies, decisions, state regulations, local economics and policies that directly or indirectly affect the individual's development and decision pertaining to career. The fourth layer of environment is the macrosystem, which can be broadly considered as social blueprint related with normative values, belief systems, lifestyles, customs, opportunities and resources embedded therein at community and national levels. Apart from above-mentioned environmental layers, Bronfenbrenner (2005) added a fifth dimension that comprises an element of time, i.e., chronosystem, which represents short- and long-term influences on individuals over the course of their lifetime. The short- and long-term impact could be due to changing socio-historical circumstances shaped by the government's policy interventions or because of social reforms within the community.

The framework of ecological systems theory provides a roadmap to better understand how tribal girls are influenced by proximal and distal environmental factors and uncover their views on accessibility of educational infrastructure available to them. Table 1 outlines the key reasons identified in extant literature that accounts for the engagement level of the students at the school level.

The ecological systems framework has the ability to incorporate various intersecting factors that affect or influence the educational attainment outcomes in the context of tribal girls. The framework also emphasizes on reciprocal interactions or bidirectional nature of causal interactions, which provide a flexible approach towards understanding how a broader set of social realities interact and (re)shape each other. This bidirectional or reciprocal nature of interactions could be understood from Bronfenbrenner observation that,

...development takes place through the processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment. (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620)

The framework has a unique ability to account for prevailing social values, gendered norms, government interventions, etc. and thereby aids in critical, in-depth analysis of the factors that constraint or facilitate tribal girl's education.

Local Context of the Study: The Case of Tribal Girl's Education in Sisai Block of Gumla District, Jharkhand

The study area is located in Jharkhand, where 26.3% of the state's population belongs to Scheduled Tribe (Census, 2011). The state has around 30 tribal communities and the prominent ones along with their

population as a percentage of total tribal population are Santhal (31.7%), Oraon (19.8%), Munda (14.2%) and Ho (10.7%). Fieldwork for this research was conducted in Sisai block, Gumla district of Jharkhand. The current research focuses on ST girls from Oraon community residing in Gokulpur village, Sisai block in Gumla district, which is about 64 kilometers west of Ranchi, the capital city of Jharkhand. Over 70% of ST households in Sisai block are estimated to live below the official poverty level of India (Census, 2011; Gang et al., 2007). Gokulpur village is considered to be an underdeveloped area with minimal public transport, poor health facilities and patchy supply of electricity and telecommunication network. Historically, the region has been affected by Naxalism (an extremist activity) and when coupled with difficult terrain, remote location and sparse population, the development interventions have been limited. Over 90% of the village population belongs to Oraon tribe, and there is a strong degree of solidarity or cohesiveness among the community members. The area has forest and agricultural and vegetable fields, which serve as one of the main livelihood opportunities for the locals. The community members are primarily engaged in seasonal agricultural or livestock farming activities. During sowing and harvesting seasons, there is an increased participation of the women in the agriculture related activities. At times, even young girls are roped in for the agricultural or collection of forest produce. Some inhabitants were involved in mining related activities (with poor work and pay benefits) in nearby areas and a few were involved in petty service jobs. In general, the community members are known for their low literacy rates, drinking and poor (long-term) saving habits. The collective living is still a prominent feature as none of the households own a personal source of water, and there were five ponds, six hand pumps and three wells, which were considered to be property of the community. Erstwhile, the community use to have indigenous institutions such as 'Dhumkuria' (Raj & Nayak, 2017), which was a gender neutral, youth dormitory for training and imparting traditional knowledge and preserve cultural heritage. However, such traditional institutions have been replaced by the formalized education system led by the government interventions.

Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

The empirical data collection for this research was conducted between the year 2017–2018, and it involved three rounds of field visits (first visit in October 2017, second visit in March 2018 and third visit in August 2018). Each field visit lasted for at least for ten days, during which the first author stayed in Gokulpur village and in Gumla district for meeting the respondents. Since the study involved subjective understanding and perception of tribal girls, a qualitative study approach was considered to be best suited. In total, 55 semi-structured interviews were conducted and the respondents were tribal girls ($N = 22$), their parents/guardians ($N = 22$) and school teachers/administrative representatives ($N = 11$). Among the tribal girls, 11 respondents were school or college dropouts. The qualitative semi-structured interviews with the tribal girls, who were still enrolled in schools, focused on discussing their personal and family background, experiences with school/college and their opinion on value of education and continuing it further. Similar questions were also asked from the tribal girls who decided to dropout, after at least one year of formal education.

The teachers and administrative representatives were from two senior secondary schools and one from a government college in Sisai. With respect to the teachers, the discussion revolved around the challenges in the education infrastructure of the region and the adjustments needed from the side of young girls to attain education. In addition, interviews were conducted with the parents to better understand the reasons for low enrollment or high dropout rates for the tribal girls in the region. During the period of stay in the Sisai block, the first author also took detailed observational notes from the field.

A snowball sampling strategy was employed to identify the potential research participants, where initial contacts were made through the block development officer of Sisai and the Principal of the schools in the region. All the participants roped in for the study were explained the objectives of the study and informed consent was sought, prior to the interviews. For the tribal girls below 18 years of age, the written informed consent was taken from the parents or legal guardian.

After data collection, the data analysis for the study involved a series of steps. The first step involved transcribing all the interviews in English and the transcripts were rechecked for completeness, accuracy and uniformity. The transcripts were carefully read multiple times to identify the codes, emerging themes and sub-themes relevant from the viewpoint of this study (see Gioia et al., 2013). The process of qualitative analysis involved identifying the lower-level (in-vivo) codes, which were later clubbed together in suitable themes. The themes were later matched up with relevant theoretical construct, which has been derived from ecological systems framework mentioned in the second section.

Findings: Key Facilitators and Barriers in Tribal Girl's Education

From the interviews, several key themes were noted, which, depending on context, could either act as facilitator or a barrier for education of tribal girls. The first and most recurring theme was the 'financial condition' of the parents followed by the 'family member's support'.

Parents and Peer Support: The Exemplar Girls Acting as Role Model

From the interviews with the tribal girls, it was evident that they were interested in receiving the education; however, there were certain factors that discouraged them from attending a school or college and from pursuing a career of their choice. The poor economic status of the parents often put pressure on the girls to act as a helping hand in either income generation or household maintenance activities. It was observed in the field that the girl's parents/family members were primarily involved in three livelihood activities—agricultural laborer (own land or land owned by others), freelance daily wage worker and construction workers. Sporadically, to supplement family income during lean months, some of the villagers migrate to nearby cities for finding casual (manual) work. Most villagers are the beneficiaries of government run public distribution schemes (providing food grains) and actively seek to find work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

It was also noted that in families that historically had success stories of girls being educated and built career for themselves, the tendency to educate the girl child was higher. The close friend and peers often influence the decision of girls to either continue or quit the school and friends or relatives doing well after education often served as a positive role model. One of the girls recounted,

...There have been success stories where my school seniors moved to Ranchi city and excelled ... some of my relatives and friends who are now based in Ranchi city, have secured some or the other job.... I also want to pursue my higher education from Ranchi and get a nice government job for myself.... (School attending tribal girl, 15 years)

While such aspirations were common among the school going girls, the girls who dropped out had a different perception regarding girls who went outside Sisai to attain higher education. One of the dropout respondents opined,

I have seen girls from my village going to cities to study, only to return and do petty household or small manual work in the village itself ... now what's the point in spending so much money studying in the city? (18-year-old school dropout girl)

Thus, one could observe that depending on the positive or negative reference frame, different girls pick relevant success or failure stories to assert their view point and thereby justify their choice of either continuing or dropping out of the school. It could be concluded that the peer group of the tribal girl could play a significant role in shaping the perceptions about the utility of formal education. Some girls, especially the school dropouts are inclined towards identifying the failure stories and therefore justify their or parent's choice of not pursuing formal education. Reference to failure stories was observed to be more prominent among the girls, who were facing financial troubles and were aware about their parent's limitations in sending them to Sisai for secondary level education. The upward social mobility is not something that is expected to be driven by the girls and when the resources are limited, education of boys takes precedence over that of the girls.

The positive role models, while less in numbers, give hope to girls, who are facing similar circumstances as the role models in their early formative years. Some girls tend to attribute the case of role models as 'exceptional' ones, who benefitted either from their links in the city or had a good luck in securing a government job. Within the Oraon culture, individuals are treated equally irrespective of their personal or professional achievements and self-aggrandizement instances are fewer. However, it was also observed that the younger generation of tribal girls are aware of the benefits of social mobility as they tend to be observant and think about ways of imitating the success of the role models.

During the interviews, three girls were referred as the role models. One had secured a government job with the secretariat in Ranchi, the second was a bank clerk, and the third girl was chosen for government sponsored, residential health training programme. The first two girls stay in the city of Ranchi and often dropped by to visit their parents and relatives in the village. The tangible benefit, as seen by the young tribal girl, was the possibility to secure a white-collar job and move from a village to a city and get exposed to a wider set of culture and lifestyle. Yet another sought after benefit for the girls was the possibility of participating in sports and inter-school tournaments, where they get an opportunity to visit nearby areas or cities for competitive sporting events or training.

The Agency of Tribal Girls: Reciprocal Interaction and Social Change

While the contextual influences are important, the tribal girls do have an agency to influence some components of self-development and in the process could also re-shape the external environmental context. Education has brought several key changes, specifically in terms of health awareness and health seeking behaviour of the female adolescents. As a part of educational and health awareness campaign, the schools have played a pivotal role in implementing *Kishori Swasthya Yojna* (adolescent girl's health scheme). Under this programme, a girl from the school was selected for a 2-week residential programme, fully sponsored by the government. After her training, the girl joined the health awareness campaign spear-headed by the local *Anganwadi* centre, where health and hygiene messages were spread among the adolescent girls. This spread positive vibes in the community and more girls were encouraged to participate, think critically and shed long held superstitious beliefs. A positive impact was other than approaching traditional healers, there has been more willingness among the young girls to seek advice of allopathic doctors for their health contingencies. They have even persuaded village elders to take advice from allopathic doctors for some of their chronic or serious health ailments. Such tangible benefits are

examples of bidirectionality and reciprocity that has been bought by the participation of girls in the formal education system.

The quality of learning or training opportunity provided in an enabling environment is reciprocated by a high level of engagement and subsequent positive impact in the day-to-day lives of the girls. The agency of tribal girls is expressed in multiple ways, which includes refusal to help in household chores during school time, choice of including or excluding someone from the peer group and maintaining boundaries with fellow students or individuals who do not subscribe to their thought process. It also manifested in their negotiation with the family members and parents over their wish to join picnic or sporting events hosted by the school or the government. Under such circumstances, some tribal girls, especially the school or college going adolescents, display the capacity of self-reflection and co-constructor of own identity and overall development. The agency of child is further reinforced if they receive reciprocal support and commitment from the parents, teachers and peer groups. However, it is not always that the agency of girl child leads to manifested change in their learning environment and at times the cultural and normative societal values create hurdles.

Culture and Normative Societal Values

The value of education was well-regarded by the tribal girls who were still in the school with an aspiration of social upgrading by securing positions such as a teacher or nurse and wanted to escape daily wage or labour-intensive jobs. However, there were conflicting feelings about the importance or real value of education for which the root cause seems to be embedded in the normative cultural or societal norms. Within the Oraon tribe culture, a child personal accomplishment on educational front is not actively sought and the community members do not push the children to achieve superior academic achievements. On the contrary, the normative expectation is that the children would share family responsibilities in whatever limited way they could (e.g., household chores, help with farming or rearing livestock). The individual's accomplishments in career are seldom discussed or revered in the community and even if the high-achieving individuals visit the village, they refrain from boasting about their achievements and accept treatment that is at par with any other community members. Few respondents also highlighted how parents at times have very low regard for the education, which is available to them in the region.

...My father has a notion that my education is not going to provide me with any job. He gave examples of girls from the village, who after completing schooling are working as daily wage labourer. So, I decided to quit the school and started learning how to sew cloths. (Dropout tribal girl, 18 years)

Most of the parents mentioned that they started looking for groom when the girl's age is around fourteen years with an ultimate objective to marry her off by eighteenth birthday. Many parents described a sense of apprehension that their girl might get involved in love affair, which was interpreted as not being serious towards the studies and therefore could be married off early. It is not unusual for the girls in the village to marry early and discontinue education, a fact which was corroborated by the teacher residing in the village. He identified seven school going girls, who recently got married and later were considered as the dropout cases by the school administration. Within the Oraon tribe culture, love marriages are not considered to be taboo and there could be several ways a marriage could be solemnized. In the Gokulpur village, most of the households know each other and at times, the neighbors could be the extended relatives. Therefore, if a love affair of a school going girl is known, usually on the request of the boy or girl, the families could meet to discuss the marriage prospects. However, in case the parents do not agree and the couple decides to elope and return after being married, they do not face serious penalties or

repercussions imposed by the community. While there was no observed incidence where an Oraon girl chose to marry a boy from different tribe (or a non-tribal person), the village elders confirmed that after following certain rituals, such inter-community marriages could be solemnized. Early marriages, either due to a love affair or arranged, has significant implications on continued engagement of the tribal girls and more often than not, priority of starting a new family life take precedence over completion of formal education. However, there have been instances where the girls have resisted early marriages and exercised their agency to pursue education before consenting to start a married life.

Attitude of Teachers and Medium of Instruction

Yet another parameter that acted either as a facilitator or barrier was the quality of teachers, their thought process and overall quality of infrastructure and education service delivery. It was noted that untrained teachers, who were often biased against the tribal students, imparted a certain degree of inferiority complex among the tribal girls. Many tribal girls invariably missed classes during sowing and harvesting season, and once they rejoin the school, they found it difficult to follow the classes.

The tribal girls often faced difficulties in terms of adjusting to the expected social behaviour in the college, where there was a mix of tribal and mainstream students. The tribal girls often highlighted how they were subjected to humiliation for their looks, appearance, poor performance and for speaking in their mother tongue or local dialect. Such negative discrimination often makes the tribal girls feel out of place and those who are not able to cope up, invariably quit the higher secondary school or college. While visiting the higher secondary school in Sisai one of the teachers confessed about verbal abuse and justified awarding physical punishment to the students,

...what else could be done to these students? We also come from far places and after so much of effort these students don't want to understand or learn any lessons.... The only way to make them learn is through fear and punishment.... (School teacher from primary school)

In contrast, some teachers were revered and they were known to impart a sense of confidence and self-worth among the tribal girls. These teachers not only motivated the girls to finish the education, but also took discretionary steps to assure learning outcomes. They found such teachers to be unbiased, encouraging and inspirational, who would not only impart the lessons but also update on the opportunities that could benefit the tribal girls.

The teachers also had a duty to visit the tribal girl's home who dropout from the school and persuade them to continue the studies. One of the school teachers who helped a few students financially and supported them to rejoin the school noted,

We need a different type of approach for these students.... Some of them live in difficult financial conditions.... So, if a little help is personally provided, like giving money or helping them as per their need, then the parents can send their children to school.... (School teacher in Gokulpur village)

Other than teachers' attitude, personal or family circumstances, the tribal girls mentioned language as a significant barrier for them while receiving education in formal school settings. Almost all tribal girls invariably mentioned their difficulties in learning the English subject, which ranged from unable to follow the curriculum to interacting with the teachers and classmates in English. A judicious mix of local language seems to appeal to the students and it acted as a facilitator in terms of maintaining the interest levels of the tribal girls.

Education System: The Low Quality of Educational Services

Other than personal and family circumstances, there were several systemic problems in the design and delivery of educational services, which either facilitated or created obstacles for the tribal girls. The concerns which were equally shared by many girls were related to distance of school or college from village, qualification and sincerity of teachers, infrastructure at school and teaching of irrelevant curriculum. The government schemes to boost participation and retention of tribal girls such as scholarship, financial aid for purchasing books, uniform, providing bicycles for commute, mid-day meal schemes did help in attracting higher enrollment, however larger anomalies, such as corruption, tend to overshadow the fringe benefits provided by the government.

One of the largest concerns with school and college education available to tribal girls was related to the availability of competent and knowledgeable teachers. Many teachers were working on ad-hoc basis and struggle to get their salaries on time. Moreover, the recruitment of teachers happened in a non-transparent fashion and there was no strong mechanism to oversee their performance and diligent delivery of services. The dilution of standards does not stop at the level of teachers, and it percolates down to the policies devised by the government to evaluate the learning progress and subsequent promotion of the students. As previously noted, a large number of tribal girls were not able to attend the classes regularly and failed to understand the lessons being taught. In order to retain the girls in schools, an order was passed by the local authorities that all the tribal girls should be promoted to next class, irrespective of their class attendance or performance in the exam¹. One of the school teachers shared her experience,

...there are many issues, I don't know from where to start.... It is hard to make them (tribal students and their parents) understand about the importance of attending the school regularly ... but what can be done? For primary classes we are ordered to promote them irrespective of their knowledge, otherwise they will leave the school.... We have promoted even those students who do not know how to read and write their names properly. (School teacher from primary section)

The lackadaisical attitude of teachers, when seen in unison with an equally casual approach of tribal girls towards education creates a unique situation where dilution of standards seems to serve the interests of bureaucrats who, rather than implementing the educational policy in its true spirit, want to achieve the targets in their formal paper work. Moreover, most of the good and competent teachers soon finds better jobs in cities, thus creating a larger vacuum in terms of supply of quality faculty members.

Lack of Infrastructure and the Local Relevance of School Curriculum

Lack of basic hygiene infrastructure for girls in the schools was deemed to be yet another barrier or facilitator in the pursuit of education for the tribal girls. When the girls were enquired about the use of toilet in the school premise, one of them noted,

...we have toilets but they are not in proper condition. It lacks the supply of running water and is too dirty to use ... no one cleans these toilets, so sometimes we have to use the open field to relieve ourselves ... also we don't prefer to come to the school during our (menses) period. (School-going tribal girl, 21 years)

Other than lack of decent toilets, yet another concern with the education system was related with the syllabus that does not connect well with the social and cultural lives of the tribal communities. Most often the girls wonder why they do not learn anything about their culture, folklores, folk stories and folk

songs that are prevalent in oral narratives of the community. The teachers too felt that the standardized text books and syllabus creates a linear, ruthless and rationalist approach towards educating kids, which were not in tandem with the indigenous approach to teach through pluralistic methods. If the syllabus is customized with more inputs from the local context of the tribal community, it could well act as facilitator in terms of retaining the tribal students.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research elaborated on the barriers and facilitators of tribal girl's education in the context of rural India. It provided empirical narratives that capture a wide range of issues prevalent both at micro- (individual) and macro- (larger structural) levels. The ecosystem model proposed by Bronfenbrenner can be suitably adapted to better understand the outcomes of this research. In this regard, Table 2 provides an outline of the key findings.

It could be interpreted from Table 2 that the macro-societal factors such as prevalent gender norms, general apathy towards girl's education and early marriages often work against the objective of achieving higher levels of educational attainment for the girls. Within the tribal culture, there tends to be less discrimination between boys and girls; however, when resources are constrained, parents tend to invest more in the education of boys. The exosystem, which refers to interventions made through educational

Table 2. Barriers and Facilitators of Tribal Girl's Education

Key Contributory (facilitating) Factors	Key Prohibitory (barrier) Factors	Larger Implications/Observations from <i>Ecological Systems Framework</i> Viewpoint
<u>Microsystem (individual and family level)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role model in family or community • Stable financial condition 	<u>Microsystem (individual and family level)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early marriage (love or arranged) and family responsibilities • Poor economic condition of parents/family • Engagement in earning livelihood or helping in domestic chores 	<u>Proximal and distal factors:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The individual girl's interest in attending school, peer and interpersonal factors (family, peer and teacher's support) are the key proximal factors. • The education policy, government's schemes, physical and economic infrastructure, societal expectations and cultural notions about value of education are some of the key distal factors. • Both the proximal and distal factors are not constant, and it evolves and changes through reciprocal interactions, over a period of time (chronosystem).
<u>Mesosystem (larger societal and cultural values)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived gains from education • Teacher's attitude and • Peer support 	<u>Mesosystem (larger societal and cultural values)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discouraging behaviour of teachers • Less push from parents and community members to do well in studies 	
<u>Exosystem (external factors or variables)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mid-day meal, bicycle • Government sponsored sporting or training events 	<u>Exosystem (external factors or variables)</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrastructure issues • Syllabus ignoring local context • Poor delivery of education, accessibility of higher education in the vicinity 	

Source: Field data collated by the authors.

policies of state and central governments do not seem to address the root cause of parent's financial constraints and perceived (lower) value of education. The incentives such as providing cash to buy books and stationaries are often misappropriated by the officials or the parents tend to spend the cash amount to meet the household expenses. A larger concern is related with automatic promotion of tribal girls, which seems to be targeting to showcase high enrollment and retention rates of girls, rather than truly investing in their learning and development process.

A loving family, supportive teachers, peers and siblings in school could be considered as the primary enablers that motivated the girls to remain in school and successfully complete their education. Better trained teachers who refrain from verbal harassment and display a greater degree of empathy could be conducive in creating a good will among the tribal girls. Yet another facilitator could be related with the provision of clean toilets, functional laboratory and computer rooms for the students.

The micro-, macro- and exosystem, when considered in tandem, has cumulative and cascading impact on the life of the tribal girls. It is important for the decision makers and education programme implementers to focus on fixing the existing low standards of schooling, orient parents about the value of education and directly intervene in case the parents struggle economically and thus refrain from sending their girl child to schools. Education played a vital role in shaping the personality of the tribal girls, and it was evident during the course of the study that those girls who attended the schools displayed a higher degree of knowledge and confidence in their thought process and conduct. There are still concerns about the limited agency and decision-making authority of the tribal girls, specifically when it comes to choosing higher educational streams. The facilitator or barrier for the tribal girls in pursuing formal education is not a linear causality, but is a result of complex reciprocal interactions of the micro system, macro-, meso- and exosystem, where the girls are active agents, (re)shaping the larger system where she is embedded. The tribal girls could realize their full potential only when both the proximal and distal environmental factors are conducive and the girl child has more avenues to exert her agency and co-create a conducive learning and support environment.

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Note

1. Under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or popularly known as Right to Education (RTE) Act-2009, it is obligatory for the government to provide free and compulsory elementary education till class/section 8 for children between the age of six to fourteen years. It also mandates that no child should be held back in any class (no detention policy) or expelled from the school till class 8th. In order to imbibe accountability and rectify complaints relating to compromised academic rigour, RTE amendment bill 2019 abolished the 'no detention' policy and left it at the discretion of the State Government. Under the new provisions, the state

government might decide to detain students who fails in the regular examination and fail to perform even after two months of remedial teaching and re-exam.

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