

Online Education in Covid-19 Pandemic: A Thematic Case Study of Secondary Grade Tribal Students from India

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Abstract: Education helps in acquiring knowledge, skills, and competencies required for the development of an individual. The outbreak of Covid-19 shut all the educational institutes worldwide. Under these circumstances, all the educational institutes switched to an online mode of education, considering it a viable option. This transition was an arduous task for both students and teachers. The situation was even more challenging for students from underprivileged communities whose dropout rates are always high, especially when they enter secondary schooling. The tribal group are called as Scheduled Tribes (ST) in India represents one such disadvantaged group. Even before the pandemic, the tribal students accounted for the highest number of dropouts at different levels of schooling. Undoubtedly, switching to an online mode of education was not an easy task for them. Now that the schools have started functioning regularly, it becomes an important task to understand the impact online education has on the learning level of students, especially from a tribal community. This exploratory study presents the thematic analysis of responses collected from fifty tribal students studying in a Secondary school dealing with their experience of education through online mode.

Keywords: *Tribal Community; Covid-19; Secondary School; India; Thematic analysis.*

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Introduction

Education plays a significant role in uplifting humanity. It serves a greater opportunity for social and economic mobility. In India, the indigenous community are called as Scheduled Tribes (ST) under the Indian constitution. The STs population constitutes 8.6% of the total Indian population, which is around 104 million people. It occupies about countries 15 percent of the area in various ecological and climatic conditions ranging from the plains to forests, hills, and other inaccessible regions. Although they constitute just a small proportion of country's population, "they disproportionately represent the people living below the poverty line, are illiterate and suffer from feeble physical health" (Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2014). Historically, the Scheduled Tribes (STs) have been isolated socially. They are also economically disadvantaged communities. They are, therefore, considered as an underprivileged community in India. The literacy rate of India is around 73% and the ST's literacy rate is just 59% which is 14% lower than India's literacy rate.

Elementary education aims to provide the basic information and skills needed for survival. The role of Secondary education is significant as it develops a person's reasoning ability and enables them to make sound decisions regarding career choices, etc. Not only it provides exposure to worldly knowledge, but it also serves as a link between elementary and higher education. The scenario of secondary education depends upon the literacy and general educational attainment trend, reflecting that a rise in literacy and general education attainment enhances the enrolment in secondary and higher education. The country's continuous economic growth and increasing demand for trained workers make secondary education quite essential. The way elementary education becomes the pathway to attain literacy, secondary education becomes a gateway to becoming a skillful individual. The individual begins to understand the complexity of the political and social processes. In simple words, secondary education lays a base for lifetime learning and human development that contributes to the holistic development of individuals and, therefore, helps the nation's development. However, the dropout rate is really high among children of tribal communities, especially after completing their elementary education.

A total of 32 tribes inhabits the Indian State of Jharkhand. The population of ST in Jharkhand is 8,645,042, which is 26% of the total population (32,988,134) of the State. A total of one-fourth of the State's population is comprised of Tribal -communities. The literacy-rate of Jharkhand is 66.41% which accounts to 76.84% of the male literacy rate and 55.42% of the female literacy rate. The State has 44,835 schools, including

40,343 government-run and 4,492 private schools. However, the dropout rates of students in Jharkhand are high compared to the national average. Only “30 out of 100 students finish school in which the dropout rates of tribal are the highest among all communities” (Radhakrishnan, 2019). It is observed that “tribal children attend primary school for the first three to four years and gain a smattering of knowledge, only to lapse into illiteracy later” (Kumar 2008). “The home environment combined with poor nutrition and financial conditions adversely affect children of poor, illiterate households, especially the historically disadvantaged communities. The learning achievement levels reflect these poor outcomes” (Rustagi & Menon, 2013).

The occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns caused the closure of almost all the educational institutes in India and the world. According to UNESCO (2020 a), it has left over 286 million students from pre-primary to upper secondary school out of school since March 2020. Almost every school and college had to switch to the online/digital method of education. Undoubtedly, technology helps students connect virtually with their teachers through online classes. However, according to global network research, “only 24% of the households have a stable internet connection, whereas other remote areas remain unreachable” (Rodricks, 2021). A UNICEF-UNESCO (2021) survey done “across 16 states in India showed that only 37.6 million students continue education through different digital learning platforms- online classrooms, TV, and radio programs”. Therefore, in this scenario where overall education was affected worldwide, it becomes crucial to understand how the online education system has affected students from tribal communities in Secondary grades in a tribal-dominated Indian states of Jharkhand.

Literature Review

Multiple studies in India highlight the problems associated with the education of tribal communities in India. Mete and Mondal (2012) raised the issue that tribal education in India is multiple, complex, and interconnected with each other. The significant problems are- poverty, the indifference of children towards formal education, the problem of teachers’ efficiency in teaching tribal students, the language problem, lack of infrastructural facilities in educational institutes, etc. Sundar (2010) stated different paradoxes and problems with the education of Tribal students. The author highlighted the consequence of formal education on tribal identity and future citizenship. There is a bit problem in determining their language of instruction in schools as different tribal communities speaking other

languages may inhabit the same village. Nambissan (1994) discusses critical issues about the language of instruction at the primary stage and reviews policy and practices relating to mother tongue education for tribal children in India. She emphasized how policymakers, academics, researchers, educators, and teachers could help children to get an education in their mother tongue which would yield better results in their learning outcomes. Encouragement of tribal mother tongues and spoken languages must become part of a more comprehensive language policy that reinstates the dignity of minority languages and provides financial and institutional support for their development. Teachers need to acknowledge the freedom of children to use languages with which they are most comfortable, which can facilitate the general learning process and contribute to specific abilities in reading and writing.

A Report of the “High-level Committee on Health, Socio-economic and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India” (2014) studied the socio-economic, educational, and health status of the tribals of India. Despite special provisions for tribals in fifth and sixth schedules in of Indian constitution, tribals are yet among the poorest and most marginalized sections of Indian society. They are only about 8.6 percent of the total population. However, they represent disproportionately the people with poor economic status, being illiterate, and suffering from deplorable physical health conditions. The report also examined the consequences of existing government programs- the Right to Education Act, 2009, Residential School programs such as Ashram schools, Eklavya Model School, and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, etc.

Rao (2020) studied the developments and results of exclusion on the STs (tribal or indigenous people) in India and the impact these have on their legal rights. The book discovers a varied range of issues connected to exclusion — “land and forest resources, habitats and livelihoods, health and disease management, gender relations, language and schooling, water resources, poverty, governance, markets and technology, and development challenges. It argues that any laws that intend to safeguard the basic rights of tribals must recognize that their diverse and complex identities are not homogenous. Those uniform laws since the colonial era have failed to address their systemic marginalization.

The overall education system suffered a lot with the occurrence of Covid-19. Most importantly, socially and economically disadvantaged students had to suffer most because of their financial constraints and challenging family environment. A report by UNICEF (2021) showed that in the age group of 14-18, around 80 % of children in India showed lower

learning levels than what they performed while physically present at school. Mehta (2021) stated that due to school closure in Covid-19, nearly “250 million children in India were adversely affected”. Most students from underprivileged groups take up jobs to support their families, which increases their dropout from school. Murali and Maiorano (2021) look at the effect of school closure on education and nutrition, as the coming of pandemic resulted in increasing malnutrition among children. The study also raised concerns about the widening of different types of inequities such as regional (students of rural areas had to suffer more than urban area students) and gender (girls suffered more than boys) due to school closure.

A field study report undertaken by Azim Premji University (2021) covered 16067 students of government schools from classes 2nd to 6th in forty-four districts across five states. It shows the “forgetting or regression kind of learning,” which means they forgot what they had learned before. The study discussed about the “assessment of four specific abilities in language and mathematics, the loss of which would have further consequences on their learning”.

These studies that were conducted during the time of covid-19 present the awful condition of educational attainment in the given period.

Therefore, the learning loss of students across the nation is a matter of great concern. Now that the schools have started functioning regularly, students from the vulnerable groups of society, who are first-generation school-goers, would require serious care and attention to cover the learning loss of the pandemic.

Objectives

The following are the objectives of this study:

- i) To understand whether online education helped tribal students in getting education during covid-19.
- ii) To understand the challenges faced by tribal students involved in getting education through online mode.

Methodology

Study Design

This study follows a thematic case study research design derived from qualitative research. A “qualitative study is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (i.e., nonnumerical) data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest” (Gay, 2012). A case study has a “naturalistic approach and is sensitive to the complexities and interactions in a context” (Stake, 1995). They often focus “in-depth on

relationships and processes and how to disentangle the complexity of a certain situation” (Denscombe, 2014).

Participants

The purposive random sampling technique was used to decide the sample for the study. The participant of the study were 50 Secondary School tribal students, their parents, and teachers.

Instrument

The primary technique used as a method for collection was the interview schedule. It was a semi-structured, informal, open-ended interview conducted with tribal students and their parents. An opinionnaire was prepared and shared through a google form to collect information from teachers. Documents such as reports, newspaper articles, documentaries, and pictures were used as the evidence to support the findings.

Data Analysis Technique

The data collected is analyzed using the thematic content analysis within the critical realist (CR) paradigm of explaining reality. “A satisfactory thematic analysis portrays the thematic content of interview transcriptions (or other texts) by identifying common themes in the texts provided for analysis” (Anderson, 2007). In this process, the collected information was read many times. An attempt was also made to interpret the participants’ reluctance, silences, pauses, and hesitations seen and observed during the interview, and then the entire text was coded.

Result and Discussions

i) Lack of any digital device at home

Only 37 of 50 tribal student families had smartphones in their houses. However, only 7 out of 37 students could use those smartphones for studying and attending their online classes. The reason being that each house could afford to keep only one smartphone which is usually possessed by the earning member of the family for their work purpose. Those seven students who could use smartphones for attending online-live classes said that they always had to face network issues during the class. Also, it was difficult for them to concentrate well in such classes as they lived in a small house where around seven to eight people stayed in a one-room house. Altogether, the kind of study environment they get at school was nearly impossible to get in online classes. Therefore, tribal students believed they really lag behind in their study compared to students whose family could afford to provide all

such facilities required for attending online classes at home. A newspaper article stated that “around 56% of students in India have no access to smartphones for e-learning” (Indian Express, 2020). A survey was conducted by “*Vidyasaarathi*,” a scholarship management portal in which around 10,000 students aged 12-28 years from across 400 Indian cities were interviewed. In the report, “poor internet connection was described as the biggest challenge for 57% of the students, while 31% struggled to focus and 12% had difficulty in clearing their doubts during online learning” (Ahaskar,2020).

ii) Increasing Absenteeism of Tribal Students

The responses given by teachers suggest that the attendance of tribal students during online classes remains consistently lower than the students of other groups. The reason mainly being the non-availability of smartphones, laptops, and tablets for attending online classes, challenging economic conditions, non-supportive home environment, and disruptive network. Tribal students, their parents, and teachers believed that students’ overall learning progress, including physical, cultural, emotional and social development, has suffered a massive setback due to school closure during lockdowns. Students with smartphones at home had difficulty utilizing various online resources available, resulting in their lower learning levels. Almost half of the teachers were of the view that remote learning materials and online teaching methods are less effective than classroom teaching.

iii) Poverty and the necessity to earn a livelihood

Even before Covid-19 times, the tribal accounted for the highest number of dropouts from school. For tribal parents, dependent on daily-wage income, children are considered as helping hands, so they expect them to either “contribute to family income directly by working as labor or indirectly by contributing in doing household chores” (Majumdar,2018). A survey carried out among 703 school dropouts conducted by Jharkhand Education Project Council (JEPC) reports that the “compulsion to earn livelihood forces hundred of students to drop out from school” (Majumdar, 2018). This was the most significant problems stated by almost 90 % of students and their families for not attending online classes during the pandemic. Majority of tribal student’s parents are daily wage earners who fall at the lowest rank in the social class system. Due to covid-19 lockdowns, their financial condition became even more pathetic. Therefore, tribal students had to go for minimal-income jobs to support their families in the

difficult time of the pandemic. This makes them neglect their studies and becomes a significant reason for their loss.

iv) Lack of awareness among parents toward education

“Education does not yield an immediate economic return”; this statement was given by almost 80-85% of tribal parents. They choose to send their children to remunerative employment to supplement their family income. Due to their poor economic condition, they cannot see the long-term benefit of educating their children at school. Therefore, “ignorance and lackadaisical attitude towards education of parents is another important challenge” (Kumar, 2008). However, other than financial constraints, 10-15% of tribal parents also blamed that the quality of education imparted through online education is not at all satisfactory, which according to them, is not worth attending. Therefore, they wanted to use their child’s time and labor to generate extra income for the family, which is an immediate benefit. In this scenario, it becomes vital to create proper awareness related to the worth of education along with appropriate counseling and guidance to positively change the attitude of tribal parents towards education.

v) Negative impact on Emotional and Cognitive development

Most parents believed that their child’s physical, cognitive, emotional and social development during the pandemic suffered a lot. Almost half of teachers also perceived online education to be less effective than classroom teaching. The ability of students to concentrate in online classes is relatively poor than what they have experienced in classroom teaching. The Secondary grade students also feel that their overall social and mental progress has slowed down. A UNICEF (2020) report also quotes that “almost all students currently spend a few hours per day studying.” The report further states that “social isolation, disruption to learning, and family’s financial insecurity are key reasons for poor mental well-being. Therefore, over a third of students aged 5-13 years and nearly half of adolescents have experienced feeble mental health”.

Conclusion

Despite all the efforts made by government, and non-government agency to provide remote access to education to students during Covid 19, “student learning levels are falling behind” (UNICEF, 2021). This study presents the thematic analysis of the responses collected from the students from tribal community, their parents, and teachers regarding online education during Covid-19, which explains the immense loss of education

for tribal students. Therefore, extra effort is required to cover up the overall loss. The UNICEF study also suggests that students from ST families have experienced more challenges, and 53% of tribal families believed that their children's mental and socio-emotional well-being had suffered the most during Covid-19. Therefore, when the schools have now reopened, it would be immense useful to recognize the strategies to bring students back to school. It might require "supplemental support, in the form of bridge courses, extended hours, community-based engagements, and teaching-learning materials" to support children in coming back efficiently to their previous study ways and "recover their lost capabilities" (Azim Premji University, 2021).

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