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Research Paper

Psychosocial Aspects of Higher Education Access: Perspective of Adivasi Youth

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the psychosocial factors influencing Adivasi youth's pursuit of higher education, grounded in Ecological Systems Theory (EST), to provide a multi-level perspective on the interaction between individuals and their environment. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and open-ended interviews with 429 final-year Adivasi students, focusing on three core constructs: self-efficacy and social support, perceived barriers and stress, and future orientation and aspirations. The research reveals that self-efficacy and social support are critical in fostering academic motivation, while financial limitations, societal expectations, and stress present significant challenges to educational advancement. Rural Adivasi students exhibit a heightened future orientation and motivation, viewing education as a pathway to overcome socioeconomic challenges. Findings indicate that students from migrant worker families face unique challenges; these students often experience lower self-efficacy due to unstable socio-economic conditions and limited educational support in their immediate environment. Furthermore, parental occupation emerges as a factor influencing self-efficacy and access decision scores, with students from stable socio-economic backgrounds showing greater confidence in pursuing higher education. These findings suggest that tailored interventions that enhance self-efficacy, reduce perceived barriers, and foster future-oriented aspirations are essential to bridging educational access gaps. The study's insights provide a foundation for policymakers and educators to create inclusive, supportive environments that empower Adivasi youth, addressing systemic inequities and the unique psychosocial needs of marginalized communities, particularly those from migrant backgrounds in India.

Keywords: *Adivasi Youth, Higher Education Access, Ecological Systems Theory, Psychosocial Factors, Migrant Worker Families*

Education is a cornerstone of individual and societal development, fostering greater awareness and deeper comprehension of social, political, and cultural contexts while enhancing socio-economic conditions. In India, the role of education is particularly critical, given the nation's pluralistic fabric and immense diversity, spanning countless cultures, religions, languages, and ethnic groups collectively forming a deeply layered and

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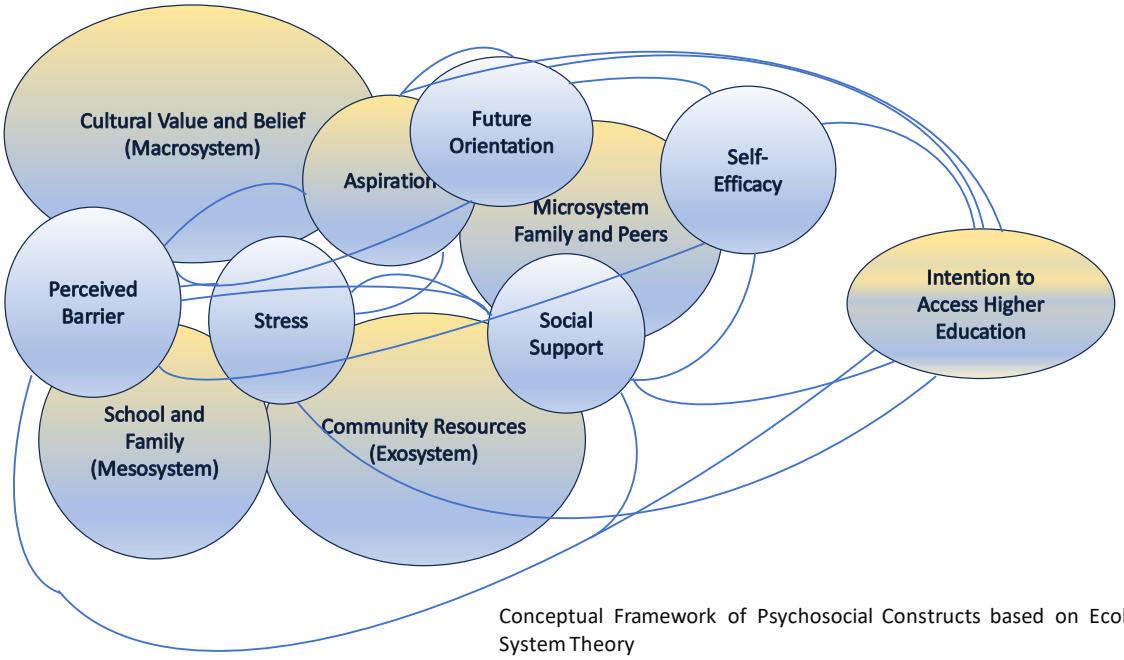
hierarchical social structure. This intricate fabric leads to unevenly distributed opportunities, largely influenced by distinctions of caste, class, and regional identity (Pradhan et al., 2022). India has the world's second-largest tribal population, a significant and culturally distinct demographic often classified by scholars into two categories: Frontier Tribes and Non-Frontier Tribes (Saikia, 2023; Rupavath, 2015; Shah, 2020). Frontier Tribes inhabit northeastern regions near international borders, while Non-Frontier Tribes, referred to as "Adivasis," reside primarily in mainland India. These Adivasi groups identify strongly with their indigenous status and possess a unique cultural identity distinct from the mainstream Hindu social framework. Although the Indian Constitution acknowledges this reality, it designates SCs and STs as "weaker sections," recognizing both their socio-economic backwardness and the entrenched discrimination and isolation they face. Despite incremental progress, including an increase in the literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes (STs) to 72.1% in 2022, a significant literacy gap of 5.6% persists between the general population and STs. (PLFS Report, 2021-22). This layered disadvantage limits these communities' participation in the national development process and impedes India's broader economic progress (Chadha & Chadda, 2020). The prevailing elitist and discriminatory social order has systematically marginalized groups like Adivasis, reinforcing disparities over generations and widening the divide between them and more privileged social strata (Thompson, 2020). For the Adivasi communities, these barriers are rooted in deep-seated socio-economic inequalities, compounded by the scarcity of infrastructure, pervasive poverty, and generational indebtedness (Saxena, 2021).

Educational planning in India has often followed rigid, norm-based approaches, typically relying on standard measures such as distance and population size, which are inadequate to address the specific needs of tribal areas (Agarwal, 2006). The Adivasi community, among the most marginalized, has endured systemic exclusion partly due to these standardized educational policies, which are disconnected from their lived realities (Bhoi & Lakra, 2022). Furthermore, Adivasis are frequently linked to occupations and roles traditionally stigmatized in society, resulting in social discrimination (Chetty, 2022). Consequently, mainstream educational frameworks appear externally imposed rather than citizen-centered, often overlooking tribal linguistic and cultural heritage. This lack of cultural integration stifles the potential for meaningful, comprehensive education, contributing to an incomplete developmental trajectory for tribal students and diminishing their psychosocial resilience in pursuing higher education (Chimirala et al., 2024). Understanding these psychosocial aspects intersecting issues of identity, cultural integrity, and systemic exclusion is vital for addressing the educational challenges faced by Adivasi youth and enabling pathways toward equitable higher education access.

Conceptual Framework of the Study



Conceptual Framework of Psychosocial Constructs based on Ecological System Theory

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of Psychosocial Construct based on Ecological System Theory

Ecological Systems Theory (EST): Provides a multi-level understanding of the individual and their environment - Examines the influence of microsystem (family, peers), mesosystem (school-family), exosystem (community), and macrosystem (cultural values) on individual development and outcomes (Brofenbrenner, 1979). This conceptual framework, grounded in Ecological Systems Theory, illustrates the layered psychosocial factors influencing a student's Intention to Access Higher Education. At the broadest level, Cultural Values and Beliefs within the Macrosystem shape societal perceptions of educational value, setting the stage for individual aspirations. The Exosystem provides Community Resources like libraries and scholarships, which offer essential support and practical access opportunities. Within the Mesosystem, School and Family environments play a foundational role, where positive interactions nurture academic confidence and lower Perceived Barriers to higher education. The microsystem, consisting of close relationships with family and peers, directly impacts self-efficacy and social support, which are essential elements for building resilience and motivation toward education.

At the individual level, key psychological constructs—Aspiration, Self-Efficacy, Future Orientation, and Stress—further influence students' educational intentions. Aspirations toward higher education are fueled by personal motivation and external encouragement, while a strong sense of Self-Efficacy and a positive Future Orientation reinforce the belief in one's ability to succeed academically. Perceived Barriers, such as financial challenges, can create obstacles, and Stress from balancing various demands may impact decision-making. Together, these interconnected systems and personal factors contribute to the student's Intention to Access Higher Education, illustrating that educational access is not solely an individual choice but one shaped by a complex interaction of socio-ecological influences.

Need and Justification of the Study

Despite constitutional provisions and incremental gains in literacy and enrolment rates, significant disparities persist in the educational attainment of Adivasi communities compared to the general population. The unique cultural identity of Adivasis and their linguistic heritage are seldom acknowledged within India's educational frameworks, resulting in a lack of culturally relevant educational content. Consequently, while education has offered some Adivasi youth avenues for personal growth and social mobility, it has not effectively catalyzed holistic development within tribal communities. This study explores the psychosocial aspects that influence Adivasi youth's access to higher education. By examining factors such as identity, self-perception, cultural integration, and socio-economic pressures, the research aims to uncover the challenges that hinder Adivasi youth's educational aspirations. Such an exploration is essential for identifying support mechanisms that can bridge the existing educational gaps and align policies with the lived realities of tribal students. This study's significance lies in its potential to inform more inclusive and adaptive educational policies, enhancing Adivasi students' access to and success within higher education. By emphasizing a citizen-centered approach, it advocates for the integration of Adivasi linguistic and cultural elements within educational curricula, aiming to foster an environment where tribal youth can thrive academically and socially. Ultimately, this research aspires to contribute to a more equitable educational landscape where Adivasi youth have both the resources and resilience to pursue higher education and achieve socioeconomic advancement.

Objectives of The Study

Key objectives of the study focus on psychosocial aspects, higher education access, and the use of Ecological Systems Theory:

- To examine the role of psychosocial constructs in shaping Adivasi students' motivation to pursue higher education.
- To identify the perceived barriers and sources of stress faced by Adivasi youth, particularly those from migrant worker families, in accessing higher education.
- To analyze the influence of future orientation and aspirations on Adivasi students' educational goals and career ambitions.
- To assess the impact of socio-economic factors, such as parental occupation, on self-efficacy and access decisions of Adivasi students.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH SETTINGS

This study adopts a quantitative framework enriched with qualitative insights to delve into the psychosocial factors that shape Adivasi youth's pursuit of higher education. Data were collected from the Dumka District in Jharkhand, a region identified by the government of India as an aspirational district. With a literacy rate of 61.02%, Dumka hosts a notable ST population of 43.22% and an SC population of 6.02%. This demographic structure makes Dumka an appropriate and impactful setting for investigating marginalized communities' educational challenges, particularly among Adivasi youth. Rooted in empirical rigor, this research builds on grounded data originally gathered for a comprehensive doctoral thesis through a mixed-methods approach. Seven higher secondary (Intermediate) institutions across Dumka were selected based on SC/ST population representation. The data collection was done through open-ended interviews and structured questionnaires. Open-ended interviews allowed students to articulate their aspirations to access higher education. At the same time, structured questionnaires gathered standardized data, enabling a robust analysis

of factors affecting their educational trajectories. This approach enriched the dataset with both empirical precision and contextual depth.

Tool Development

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with Kaiser normalization and Varimax rotation was conducted to explore the factor structure underlying the data. While Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is typically preferred for scale development based on established theoretical constructs, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) offers a more flexible approach to investigating the multidimensionality of pre-defined constructs (Tria, 2024).

The analysis yielded a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) (Kaiser, 1974). value of .74, indicating excellent sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) was statistically significant ($p < .001$), validating the data's suitability for factor analysis. The EFA initially identified six factors (24 items) with eigenvalues greater than 1, but factors with loadings below .400 and items displaying equal double loadings were excluded. This refinement produced a three-component solution, accounting for 54.7% of the total variance. Three key factors (15 items) were finally selected as scale variables and labeled as follows: (1) Self-Efficacy and Social Support (three positive and two negative items), (2) Perceived Barriers and Stress (two positive and three negative items), and (3) Future Orientation and Aspirations (four positive and one negative items). Items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from 1 ("totally disagree") to 4 ("totally agree"). To ensure accuracy in scale reliability, items with negative loadings were reverse-coded. All scales demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha<.861$), indicating a high level of reliability. The research focused on three fundamental psychosocial constructs in relation to accessing higher education:

- **Self-Efficacy and Social Support:** This dimension sought to understand students' confidence in their academic potential and the influence of familial, peer, and community support in nurturing their educational goals.
- **Perceived Barriers and Stress:** Here, the study examined the multifaceted challenges these students face, ranging from financial hardships and linguistic limitations to societal pressures and the burdens of balancing academic pursuits with familial duties.
- **Future Orientation and Aspirations:** This theme captured students' aspirations, career ambitions, and the extent to which socio-cultural expectations shape their long-term educational objectives.

Sampling and Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was employed to focus specifically on Adivasi students in their final year of intermediate studies, thereby capturing the perspectives of individuals at a critical juncture (final year intermediate course) in their educational journey. This targeted approach allowed for a profound exploration of the unique challenges faced by this underrepresented group. The study's sample size comprised 429 students, providing a statistically significant dataset and allowing for a nuanced understanding of both collective trends and individual experiences.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1: Overview of Survey Sample

Category		Frequency	Percent
Father Occupation	Government Job	36	8.4
	Private Job	12	2.8
	Farmer	250	58.3
	Daily Wage Worker	7	1.6
	Migrated worker	124	28.9
Family Income	Below 30000	345	80.4
	30000-60000	57	13.3
	Above 60000	27	6.3
Type of Family	Joint	303	70.6
	Nuclear	126	29.4
Locality	Urban	130	30.3
	Rural	299	69.7
Gender	Male	248	57.8
	Female	181	42.2

Table 1 shows the survey sample consists mainly of students from low-income, rural, agrarian backgrounds, with a large proportion of fathers working as farmers (58.3%) or migrant laborers (28.9%). Most families earn below 30,000 INR annually, and around 70% of participants live in joint families, which may provide extended support but also place additional financial and caregiving pressures on students. The sample is predominantly rural (69.7%) and includes slightly more male (57.8%) than female participants, reflecting common gender imbalances in educational access. These socio-economic and demographic factors shape students' educational aspirations, access to resources, and overall potential to pursue higher education, highlighting the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups like Adivasi youth.

Table 2: Correlations (Pearson's r) between the Constructs of Survey Scales

	Self-Efficacy and confidence	Perceived Barriers and Stress	Future Orientation and Aspiration
Self-efficacy and social support	1	.275**	.460**
Perceived Barriers and Stress	.275**	1	.634**
Future Orientation and Aspiration	.460**	.634**	1

The Pearson correlation analysis examines the relationships between the three constructs: Self-Efficacy and Social Support, Perceived Barriers and Stress, and Future Orientation and Aspiration. The correlation coefficients indicate the strength and direction of association between these constructs, with statistical significance noted at $p < .05$. There is a positive correlation ($r = .275$) between Self-Efficacy and Perceived Barriers. This shows that students who feel higher levels of self-efficacy and social support also perceive slightly higher levels of Stress, potentially managing perceived barriers more effectively. There is a stronger positive correlation ($r = .460$) between Self-Efficacy and social support and Future Orientation and Aspiration, indicating that students with greater self-efficacy are more likely to have clearer aspirations and a positive outlook on future possibilities. The strongest correlation observed is between Perceived Barriers and Stress and Future Orientation and

Aspiration (r = .634), suggesting that students who feel more stress, despite perceived barriers, also have stronger aspirations for the future.

Table 3 t-test for locality and Psychosocial dimensions

Independent Samples Test Locality	**t-test for Equality of Means**			**Mean Score**	
	T	**Sig. (2-tailed)**	**Mean Difference**	**Urban**	**Rural**
Self-Efficacy and Social Support	.211	.833	.063	22.97	22.91
Perceived Barriers and Stress	-1.399	.162	-.425	29.05	29.47
Future Orientation and Aspiration	-2.055	.041	-.689	28.36	29.05
Access Decision Score	-3.289	.001	-1.15619	16.31	17.47
Psychosocial Score	-1.399	.162	-1.051	80.38	81.43

The table provides insights into how urban and rural students differ across several psychosocial constructs related to their educational aspirations and perceived support systems. A statistically significant difference (p-.04 < .05) was found in future orientation and aspiration scores, with rural students scoring slightly higher than urban students. This result suggests that rural students perceive a slightly stronger future orientation and aspiration, possibly due to a higher motivation to change their circumstances or pursue further education as a pathway to economic improvement. The access decision score shows a highly significant difference (p-.001 < .05). between urban and rural students, with rural students scoring higher. This suggests that rural Adivasi students place more emphasis on accessing higher education.

Table 4: Multiple Comparisons Post Hoc test of Fathers' occupation, Psychosocial constructs, and Access decision

Dependent Variable	**(I) Father Occupation**	**(J) Father Occupation**	**Mean Difference (I-J)**	**Sig.**
Self-Efficacy and Social Support	Government Job	Private Job	-1.944*	.040
	Private Job	Government Job	1.944*	.040
		Migrated	1.806*	.035
	Migrated worker	Private Job	-1.806*	.035
Access decision score	Government Job	Migrated	-1.47491*	.019
	Private Job	Farmer	1.90964	.042
	Farmer	Private Job	-1.90964	.042
		Migrated workers	-1.57899*	.000
	Migrated worker	Government Job	1.47491*	.019
		Farmer	1.57899*	.000
*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.				

The table presents significant insights into how students' self-efficacy, social support, and access decisions for higher education are impacted by the occupation of their fathers. The analysis shows that students whose fathers are in government jobs exhibit significantly higher levels of self-efficacy and support than those with fathers in private jobs. With a mean difference of -1.944 and a significance level of 0.040, this difference highlights the positive role that job security, associated with government employment, may play in fostering students' self-efficacy and sense of external support. Moreover, children of migrant workers show significantly lower self-efficacy and social support compared to those whose fathers hold private jobs (mean difference of -1.806, p = 0.035). The transient nature and

economic uncertainty of migrant work may limit resources or stability, impacting students' sense of self-efficacy. These findings suggest that students in economically and socially insecure environments may benefit from additional confidence-building interventions or academic support to bridge this gap. The access decision score, which reflects students' perceived ease or likelihood of pursuing higher education, varies significantly across father's occupational groups. Specifically, students with fathers in government positions demonstrate significantly higher access decision scores than those with migrant worker fathers (mean difference of -1.47491, $p = 0.019$), indicating that job security and stability in government roles may encourage students to pursue higher education with greater certainty. The contrast between private jobholders and farmers also reveals that students with fathers in private jobs tend to have higher access decision scores than those with fathers in agriculture (mean difference of 1.90964, $p = 0.042$). This difference may arise from the income variability and socio-economic challenges common in agricultural livelihoods, which impact students' views on accessible educational opportunities. Notably, the children of migrant workers show lower access decision scores compared to those of farmers (mean difference of -1.57899, $p < 0.001$), emphasizing the barriers faced by families in transient, less stable employment situations. These barriers might stem from fluctuating financial resources and fewer support systems, which inhibit educational ambitions.

Table 5: Multiple regression analysis with Access decision Score

Model	**Unstandardized Coefficients**		**Standardized Coefficients**	**t**	**Sig.**
	B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**		
Self-Efficacy and Social Support	.079	.065	.066	1.299	.035
Perceived Barriers and Stress	-.055	.073	-.047	-.749	.045
Future Orientation and Aspiration	.130	.071	.123	1.829	.038
a. Dependent Variable: Access decision score					

The regression analysis aimed to assess the influence of key psychosocial factors on students' decisions to access higher education. Self-efficacy and Social Support, with a standardized Beta of 0.066, a positive coefficient suggests that higher self-efficacy and social support are associated with an increase in the Access Decision Score, reflecting a potential positive influence on students' decisions to pursue higher education. Perceived Barriers and Stress also negatively affected access decisions (t -0.749, p .045<0.05). This implies that increased perceived barriers and stress discourage decisions to pursue higher education. Future Orientation and Aspiration showed a positive relationship with access decisions, and the effect was statistically significant (t 1.829, p .038<0.05). Thus, students with stronger future orientation and aspirations were more inclined to pursue higher education.

DISCUSSION

This article's primary research questions investigate the influence of students' psychosocial environment—specifically self-efficacy, perceived barriers, stress, social support, future orientation, and aspirations—on their intentions to pursue higher education while also exploring variations in these intentions based on locality and family background. The conceptual framework, as presented in Figure 1, underscores self-efficacy and social support as crucial factors for both academic motivation and perceived opportunity, which collectively help to clarify students' intentions to access higher education. For students,

especially those from marginalized communities like the Adivasi, believing in their own abilities (self-efficacy) can positively influence their perceived support system, potentially offsetting the impacts of certain educational and social barriers. Though moderate, this correlation implies that interventions to improve students' confidence may also enhance their perception of available support.

1. **Self-Efficacy and Social Support:** This study identifies self-efficacy as a critical contributor to academic motivation and persistence, affirming existing research on the role of social support in shaping educational pursuits supported by the study of Cheng (2020) and Ahmadi et al. (2023). Among Adivasi youth who face systemic disadvantages, fostering self-efficacy is essential to counteract hesitation and self-doubt about pursuing higher studies. Confidence-building measures, like skill development programs and mentorship, can thus play a pivotal role in reinforcing students' belief in their academic capabilities, which may ultimately increase their commitment to higher education
2. **Perceived Barriers and Stress:** The negative correlation between perceived barriers and stress indicates that obstacles like financial limitations and family obligations can hinder educational aspirations, and stress serves as a critical factor in reducing motivation. For Adivasi students, community or family encouragement can counterbalance the effects of these barriers, but only to an extent similar to findings done by Gerard and Booth (2015) and Fuller (2014). The influence of stress highlights the need for structural interventions, such as guidance and counseling, to help students overcome perceived obstacles and move toward educational goals.
3. **Future Orientation and Aspiration:** Future orientation and aspiration are essential components in goal-setting and long-term planning, serving as motivation for students to navigate socio-economic challenges and pursue academic achievements. This study finds that rural Adivasi students demonstrate heightened future orientation, supported by the study of Vasava (2022). likely driven by the limited economic opportunities in rural areas, which incentivizes them to seek educational pathways for better socio-economic prospects. Developing this future-focused mindset among Adivasi students, alongside providing guidance and tangible resources, can empower them to translate aspirations into concrete academic plans.
4. **Impact of Locality on Access Decision Scores:** The analysis reveals a significant difference in access decision scores between rural and urban students, with rural students showing higher motivation toward higher education. This indicates that, for rural Adivasi students, education is perceived as a critical path to socio-economic advancement, possibly due to fewer local job opportunities, similar to the findings of Thelma et al. (2024) and Redding and Walberg (2012. Recognizing this need, policies should focus on improving rural educational infrastructure and support systems to enable these students to pursue their ambitions more effectively.
5. **Impact of Parental Occupation on Self-Efficacy and Access Decisions:** Parental occupation has a significant impact on students' psychological and educational outcomes. Children of government employees tend to exhibit higher self-efficacy, likely due to the stability associated with these occupations, which positively affects their educational aspirations. Conversely, students from migrant or agricultural backgrounds show lower self-efficacy and access decision scores, indicating that students from sound socio-economic backgrounds tend to have greater resources and confidence to pursue higher education, supported by the findings of Bowden and Doughney (2010). underscoring the need for targeted interventions that address disparities in socio-economic backgrounds. By bridging

these gaps, educational policies can support marginalized students in overcoming resource limitations and building confidence in their academic journey.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the complex psychosocial landscape that influences educational access among Adivasi youth, underscoring the roles of self-efficacy, perceived barriers, social support, and future aspirations. By enhancing confidence and providing robust support systems, educators and policymakers can strengthen these students' aspirations and resilience against barriers to higher education. The analysis suggests that while students from urban and rural areas face similar psychosocial challenges, rural students demonstrate a particularly strong drive to leverage education as a means to overcome socioeconomic limitations, reinforcing the need for localized policy support. Furthermore, the findings reveal the significant influence of parental occupation on educational aspirations, suggesting that students from sound socio-economic backgrounds have more resources and support to pursue higher education. Socio-economic inequalities are a continuing challenge in both developed and underdeveloped countries (Marks et al., 2006; Cardak & Ryan, 2006). Programs aimed at enhancing self-efficacy, bridging socio-economic gaps, and cultivating future aspirations thus provide marginalized youth with the motivation and means to pursue their educational goals. The insights from this study offer a valuable roadmap for policymakers and educators seeking to create an inclusive, supportive educational environment for Adivasi youth. Multi-layered interventions that boost self-confidence, address perceived barriers, and nurture future-oriented aspirations can collectively empower marginalized students to envision and achieve higher educational success, ultimately supporting their socio-economic advancement and contributing to equity in education access. Educational policymakers and institutions should consider multi-layered interventions to address these factors holistically. Programs that build confidence offer tangible support to overcome perceived barriers and stress and help students envision a promising future that could empower marginalized youth to bridge the educational gap and achieve greater socio-economic mobility. Though it is undeniable that access to formal education and a rate of higher enrolment has introduced a degree of social mobility within tribal communities, despite these shifts, tribal communities continue to bear disproportionately high rates of illiteracy, starkly reflecting the enduring disparities and the pressing need for an education system that is genuinely inclusive, adaptive, and attuned to the specific needs of all cultural groups. This study format enables a thorough and layered exploration of access to higher education, addressing systemic inequities and the individual hurdles that Adivasi students encounter. By focusing on Dumka's Adivasi youth, this research provides illuminating insights into the broader socio-educational landscape of India's tribal communities. The findings have the potential to inform educational policies that prioritize inclusivity, cultural resonance, and support for marginalized students, ultimately contributing to an equitable framework that embraces the aspirations and identities of Adivasi youth in India.

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Conflict of Interest

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