

Research Paper

Phenomenological Experience of Tribal Students with Disabilities of Social Capital in Their Education: A Comprehensive Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores, through phenomenological analysis, the experiences lived by students with disabilities from tribes within Indian schools and colleges, how intersecting barriers impede their access to social capital-including networks and institutional resources that support academic outcomes. Notwithstanding the NEP 2020 and RTE Act 2009 legal frameworks, which lay a foundation in inclusive education, huge gaps exist in implementation, especially pertaining to infrastructure, teacher preparation, and social inclusion. This paper has underscored the need to recognize these structural inequalities and their implications for the educational trajectories and consequent socioeconomic outcomes of tribal students with disabilities.

Keywords: *Social Capital, Phenomenology, Inclusive Education, Educational Access, Intersectionality, Qualitative Interviews, Language Barriers, Disability Stigma*

In India, children between the ages of six to fourteen have the right to free education, further supported by the Right to Education Act of 2009. The number of students with disabilities from tribal groups who are being left behind is quite minute at 0.86% of the total school enrollments, significantly lower than the National Education Policy target. The introduction of certain factors, such as social capital deficits, further sets them against a multitude of barriers such as stigma and communication, poorly trained educators, and inaccessible settings. Gross systemic exclusion represents inculcated educational injustice, supported by their historical marginalization. Based on this, the present study utilizes a phenomenological approach to bring forth their lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and situated complexities of identity to bridge the knowledge gap about challenges in educational contexts. It emphasizes an interplay of social capital across diverse levels and uses an intersectional perspective to explain the additive disadvantages they face because of the interaction among tribal identity, disability, and rural settings.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Capital Theories and Their Application to Education

Bourdieu's concept of social capital relates to hierarchical orders and class and ranking systems. He also understands tribal students with disabilities, whose access to education is affected negatively by a low level of social capital, poverty, and discrimination. On the other hand, Coleman points to the family and community levels as fundamental aspects understood through social capital. Robert Putnam understands social capital to consist of bonding and bridging capital. Tribal and other indigenous communities have a bonding level of social capital but lack a bridging one. Education for all could influence the development of bridging capital, rather than exclusive education systems that enhance the marginalization process. A phenomenology method is a way to request support for a qualitative investigation whose purpose is to enhance the understanding and awareness of tribal students with disabilities. The intersectionality theory considers different identities and how they create a disadvantage for tribal and other indigenous communities, focusing on the situation and self-empowerment of Indian students with disabilities.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of tribal children with disabilities regarding social capital and education. Purposive sampling was used to select 20 tribal children with disabilities from tribal communities. Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in familiar community settings. I interviewed 20 tribal children with disabilities in order to understand their lived experience about the social capital and their education. Interviews were conducted in the local language with informed consent from parents or guardians and assent from the children. Data were analysed using phenomenological thematic analysis to identify key themes emerging from participants' narratives.

Result of the Study

The analysis of the phenomenological data revealed the following major themes. The themes are Barriers to family- Based Social Capital, barriers to peer – based social capital and school integration, barriers to teacher- mediated social capital and institutional support, barriers to bridging social capital and institutional access. The study is also supported by the quantitative secondary data as well.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL DEFICITS

Barriers to Family-Based Social Capital

Limited parental education and socioeconomic limitations shape the development of tribal parental social capital. Studies have proven that more than half of tribal parents across India are illiterate, influencing their ability to appreciate the value of the education system. As such, the parental attitude towards the child's education improves when the socioeconomic advantages of tribal parents are considered.

Stigma and cultural beliefs encountered by the disabled child increase the challenges of the learning disadvantage. For the disabled child, the negativity associated with the internalized

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cultural attitude becomes major obstacles to the motivation and self-perception of the parent, creating a learning disadvantage for the child.

Barriers to Peer-Based Social Capital and School Integration

Linguistic challenges pose a huge hindrance in the creation of social capital in tribal handicapped students, particularly in areas like Vidarbha, where the chief languages spoken are Marathi, Hindi, and Oriya. Around 25% of the handicapped tribal students speaking Gondi as their first language face a huge communication drawback, which affects their too-low levels of social capital. Only 7% of the teachers provide their tribal students with instructional support in their tribal dialect. These handicapped students, therefore, feel out of touch, as they could express their basic needs.

Aside from language barriers, tribe-based students suffer from stigma or discrimination based on their disabilities and ethnicity. Double stigma leads to feelings of embarrassment and fear of rejection, which makes the tribe-based students uncomfortable to talk freely about their disabilities. They live in a challenging atmosphere as self-disclosure of their disabilities exposes them to greater scrutiny. Physical infrastructure also presents significant challenges in this regard: only 54.9% of schools had ramps, 35.6% had appropriate toilet facilities, and only 11% provided transport for children with special needs. These inadequacies are especially acute in rural areas and have negative implications for the potential of tribal students to access school, participate in extracurricular activities, and make friends, which increases their feelings of exclusion from the school community.

Barriers to Teacher-Mediated Social Capital and Institutional Support

Teachers play a vital role in creating an inclusive educational environment, but generally, teacher training in inclusive pedagogy and disability awareness is very low in India. According to UDISE+, 12% of special educators are unqualified, which negatively impacts the instructional quality for many students. In Maharashtra, only 4% of teachers in ashram schools have received training in tribal cultures and languages, while 77% have no strategies for multilingual classrooms. This gap leads to poor understanding of needs among teachers of tribal students with disabilities, who often display dismissive attitudes and hold very low expectations from them. This becomes self-fulfilling prophecy, reducing academic support and aspirations among these students, who also negotiate the educational landscape devoid of social capital and support networks.

Some specialized services, such as speech and occupational therapy, are provided in the cities, while rural tribal communities have limited resources. The research shows that even these students can receive aid only after disclosing their disabilities, which is daunting due to prevailing stigmas. Consequently, tribal students with disabilities attending under-resourced schools miss out on key support services that severely limit their opportunities to learn and interact properly.

Barriers to Bridging Social Capital and Institutional Access

The tribal children of West Singhbhum, Jharkhand, face great hardships in accessing educational opportunities. The area is highly isolated and lacks sufficient roadways, and with only 1,354 primary schools, 579 of them being middle schools, and 171 high schools available in a large tribal population, children travel great distances in their quest for higher

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education. However, the situation is even more appalling when it comes to handicapped children. The lack of essential documentation like Aadhaar cards and birth certificates forces more than a third of tribal children from attending school. The cumbersome process of getting children enrolled through adequate documentation makes accessing education even more difficult, especially for handicapped children.

Such accumulated challenges explain the myriad challenges that tribal students with disabilities still have in the development of their social capital. This is mainly because most are not fortunate enough to access the necessary education support facilities, peers, as well as teachers, a situation that often makes the students feel like aliens or outcasts in the school environment, hence the hopeless feelings about their academic expectations. This makes the students feel as though the school does not want them; hence, the students' self-perceptions are negatively impacted, affecting their future prospects. This, therefore, calls for urgent attention on the various layers of exclusion that some marginalized groups experience in the education sector.

QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL DEFICITS IN TRIBAL STUDENT EDUCATION

Enrollment and Accessibility Disparities

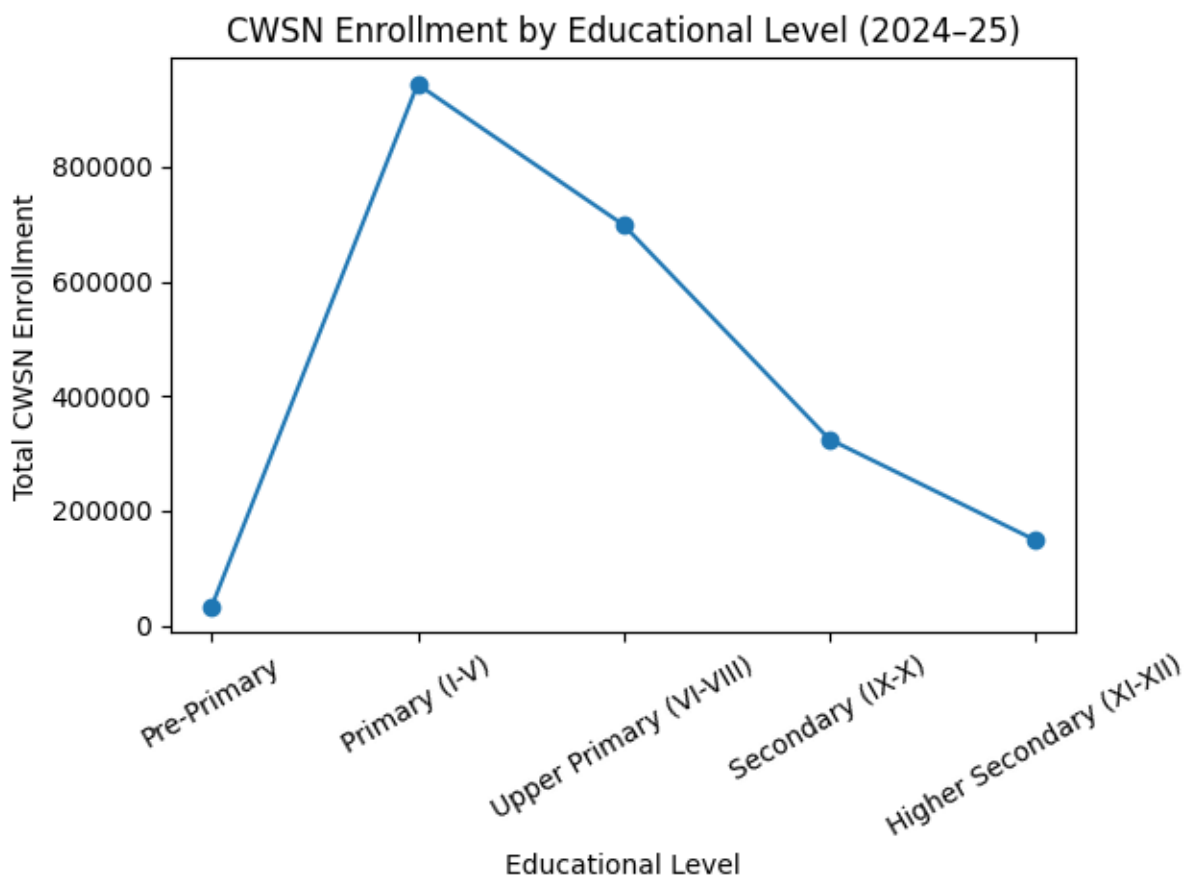
The total figure for CWSN for the enrollment year 2024-25 stands at 2.11 million, constituting 0.86% out of the total enrollments of 247 million; this shows that the data falls far below the target set in the National Education Policy, which set the target at 2.5% to 3%. However, there are considerable gaps when educating at higher levels; for example, only 44.59% are enrolled for primary level, and only 7.04% for higher secondary levels. Gender gaps are evident, with girls making up 42.91% and boys 57.08% for CWSN enrollments.

Table 1: CWSN Enrollment by Educational Level (2024-25)

Educational Level	Boys	Girls	Total CWSN	% of Level Total Enrollment
Pre-Primary	20,112	13,127	33,239	1.57%
Primary (I-V)	553,362	390,150	943,512	44.59%
Upper Primary (VI-VIII)	395,353	303,191	698,544	33.01%
Secondary (IX-X)	178,843	146,098	324,941	15.36%
Higher Secondary (XI-XII)	80,282	68,740	149,022	7.04%
Total (I-XII)	1,207,840	908,179	2,116,019	0.86%

Source: UDISE+ 2024-25 Data, Ministry of Education, India

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Tribal Student Dropout Crises

Any description of the social capital deficiency observed under tribal students would include, in a big way, the sudden rise observed in dropouts. Under Table 2, tribal students under Eklavya Model Residential Schools, where the specific objective is to exclusively design these schools for tribal children, show an increase, rising to an unprecedented level from 111 in 2021-22 to 552 in 2024-25 in just a span of three years, nearly five-fold. In percentage, if calculated for individual years, the rise is observed to be 117.1% from 2021-22 to 2022-23, a rise of 36.5% from 2022-23 to 2023-24, and a rise of 67.8% from 2023-24 to 2024-25. Third, states where tribal students are in a high percentage, with high majorities being tribal, are Chhattisgarh - 88, Odisha - 87, and Madhya Pradesh - 71, respectively.

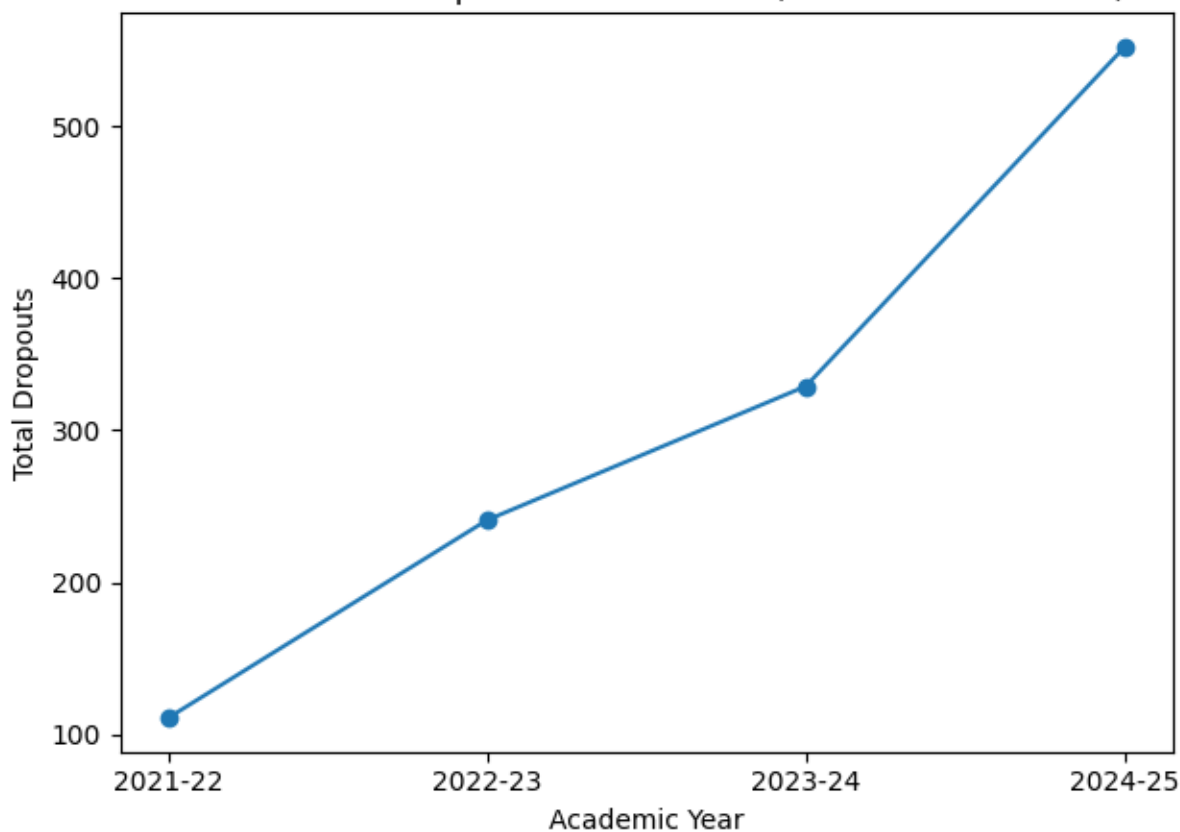
Table 2: Tribal Student Dropout Rates in EMRS (2021-22 to 2024-25)

Academic Year	Total Dropouts	% Increase YoY
2021-22	111	
2022-23	241	117.1%
2023-24	329	36.5%
2024-25	552	67.8%

Source: Ministry of State for Tribal Affairs, Government of India

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Tribal Student Dropout Trend in EMRS (2021-22 to 2024-25)



Regional Disparities in CWSN Enrollment

The enrollment of CWSN varies significantly across different states, reflecting the social capital of each state. Thus, states with more adequate educational infrastructure and budgetary provisions for inclusive education—such as Kerala (121,348 CWSN enrolled or about 5.73% of the total enrollment) and Tamil Nadu (139,342 CWSN enrolled or about 6.59% of the total enrollment)—exceed the national average. States that are less well-resourced report lower enrollments. For example, Bihar enrolls 180,358 CWSN, while Assam reports 54,628 CWSN. Specific issues in each region have been highlighted: Kerala faces challenges in both urban and rural areas, Bihar lacks adequate infrastructure, Uttar Pradesh needs better teacher training, and Assam faces challenges on account of remote areas. Overall, the disparate access to institutional social capital—including access to infrastructural quality, capability of teachers, and support services—significantly impacts educational opportunities for tribal children with disabilities across different states.

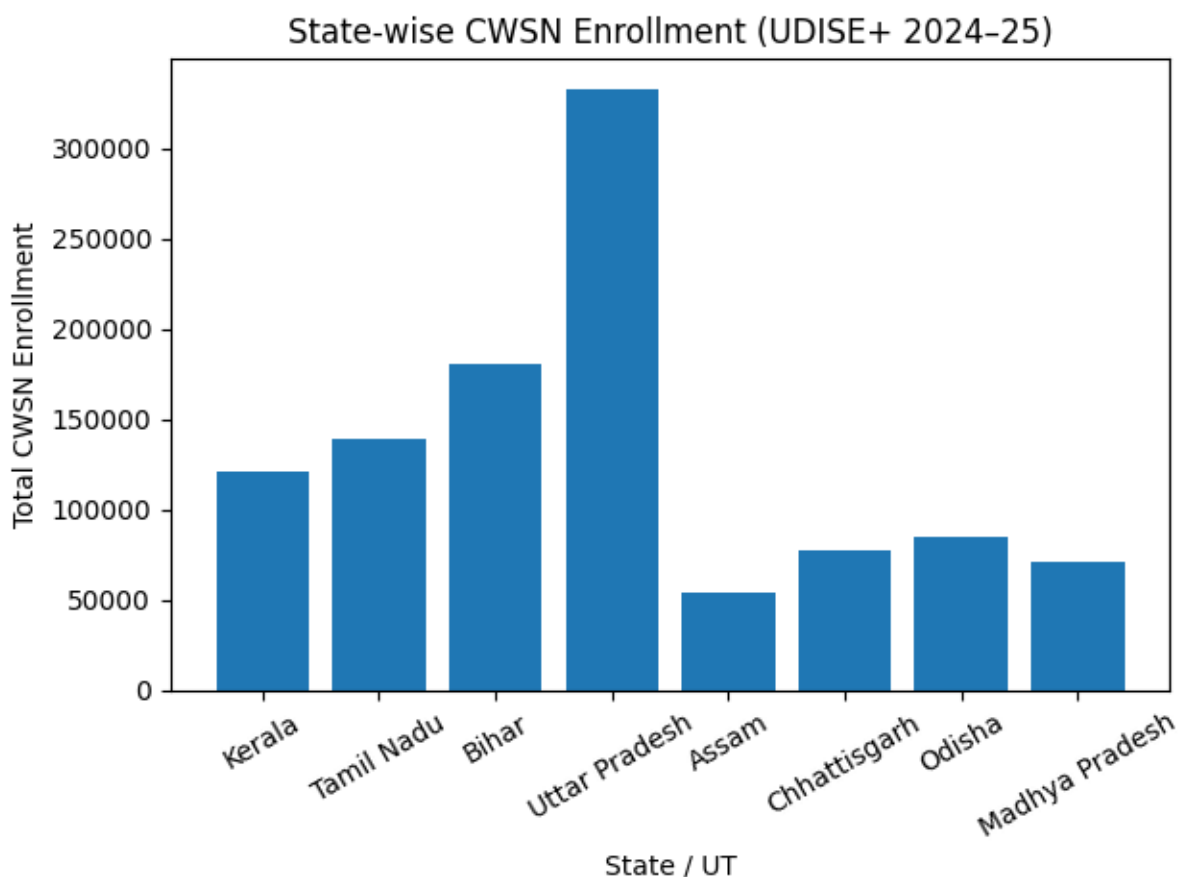
Table 3: State-wise CWSN Enrollment and Key Challenges

State/UT	Total CWSN Enrollment	% Female	Primary Challenge
Kerala	121,348 (5.73%)	39%	Urban-rural divide
Tamil Nadu	139,342 (6.59%)	40%	Vocational integration
Bihar	180,358 (8.52%)	46%	Infrastructure deficits

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State/UT	Total CWSN Enrollment	% Female	Primary Challenge
Uttar Pradesh	332,629 (15.72%)	42%	Teacher training gaps
Assam	54,628 (2.58%)	45%	Remote access barriers
Chhattisgarh	78,000 (est.)	44%	Language barriers
Odisha	85,000 (est.)	43%	Accessibility issues
Madhya Pradesh	71,000 (est.)	41%	Infrastructure deficits

Source: UDISE+ 2024-25 Data, Education for All in India



Infrastructure Accessibility and Institutional Social Capital

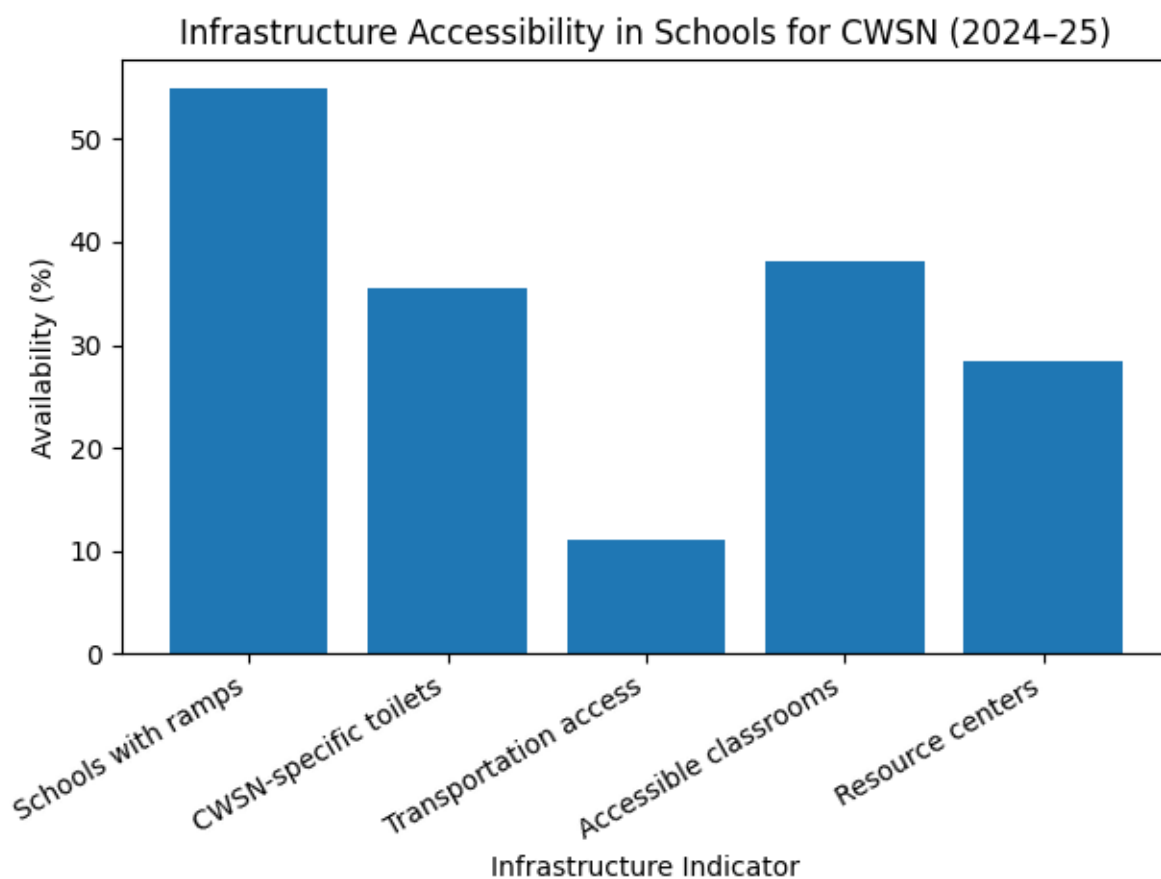
Infrastructural Without the infrastructures, the students will not be able to move freely within the school compound on their own, access the restrooms, take full participation in the classroom lessons, as well as take the services of the school. To take the students to school without the mandatory parts of accessibility is to communicate to the person the feeling of not belonging, being assisted everywhere, as well as the denial of participation.

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Table 4: Infrastructure Accessibility in Schools for CWSN (2024-25)

Infrastructure Indicator	Availability %	Gap from 100%
Schools with ramps	54.9%	45.1%
Schools with CWSN-specific toilets	35.6%	64.4%
Transportation access for CWSN	11.0%	89.0%
Accessible classrooms	38.2%	61.8%
Resource centers	28.5%	71.5%

Source: UDISE+ 2024-25 Data, Analysis by Ministry of Education



Literacy Gaps and Educational Outcomes Among Tribal Populations

The scenario of disadvantages faced by tribes in education can be understood from the literacy statistics. Table 5 shows the literacy and dropout rates of tribal children. The literacy percentage of tribes in Gadchiroli District, where Gondi is widely spoken, is as low as 54.3%, much lower than the state's average of 82.9%. The difference between the two genders is quite alarming. The literacy percentage of males is 72.4%, whereas the percentage of females is as low as 38.0%, i.e., there is a difference of 34.4% between the two. Also, the dropout percentage of tribal children is as high as 55% at the elementary level and is further higher,

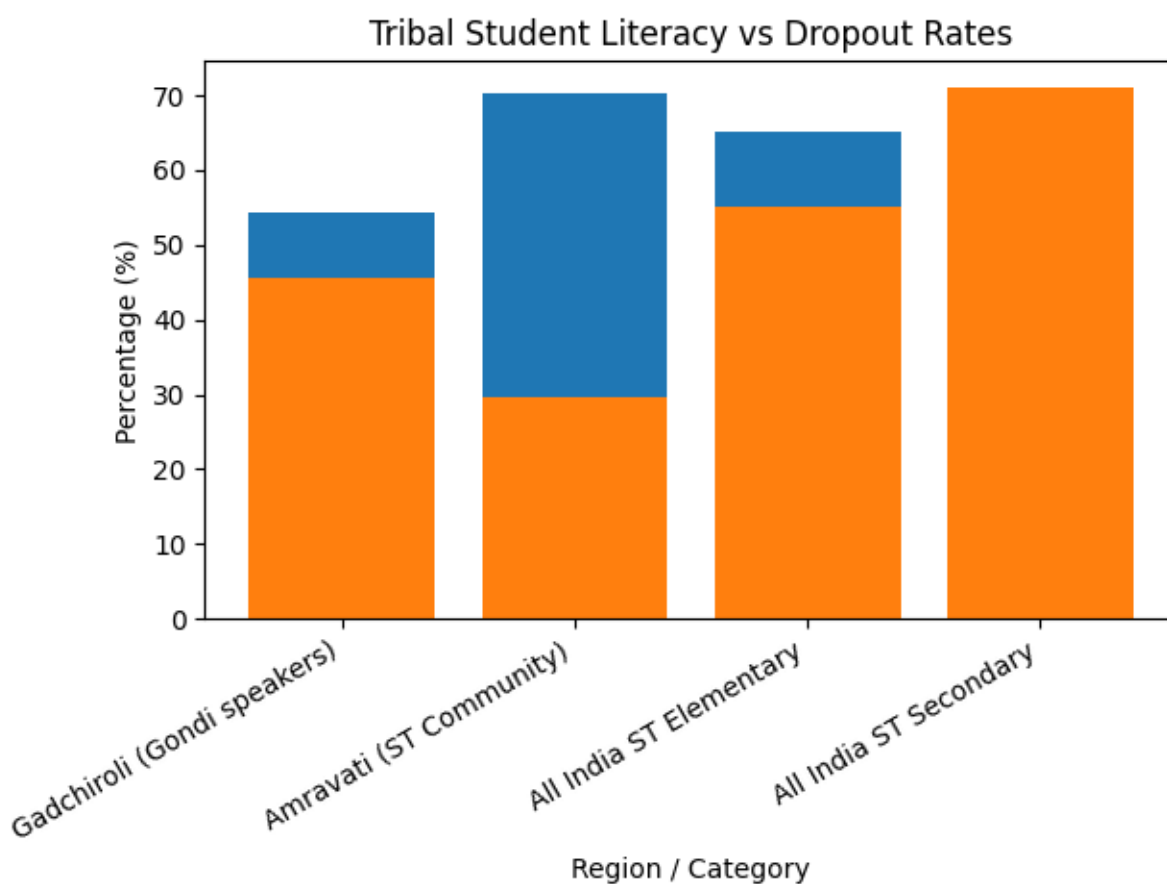
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i.e., 71%, at the secondary level. It is quite clear from the statistics that the disadvantages faced by the tribes in education are quite high, even without considering the differently abled.

Table 5: Tribal Student Literacy and Dropout Rates

Region/State	ST Literacy Rate %	Gender Literacy Gap (M-F)	Dropout Rate %
Gadchiroli (Gondi speakers)	54.3%	34.4 percentage points	45.7%
Amravati (ST Community)	70.3%	10.0 percentage points	29.7%
All India ST Elementary	65.0%	15.0 percentage points	55.0%
All India ST Secondary	55.0%	18.0 percentage points	71.0%

Source: Census and Educational Research Data



Multidimensional Social Capital Barriers

Table 6 shows the different barriers faced by the tribal disabled students in attaining social capital and the results from different research studies on the frequency of the different barriers. The results show the highlighted barriers as the attitudes of teachers as well as bias (79% of studies), language exclusivity (73% of studies), reduced socialization among peers (71% of studies), lack of social contacts from the family (68% of studies), transportation

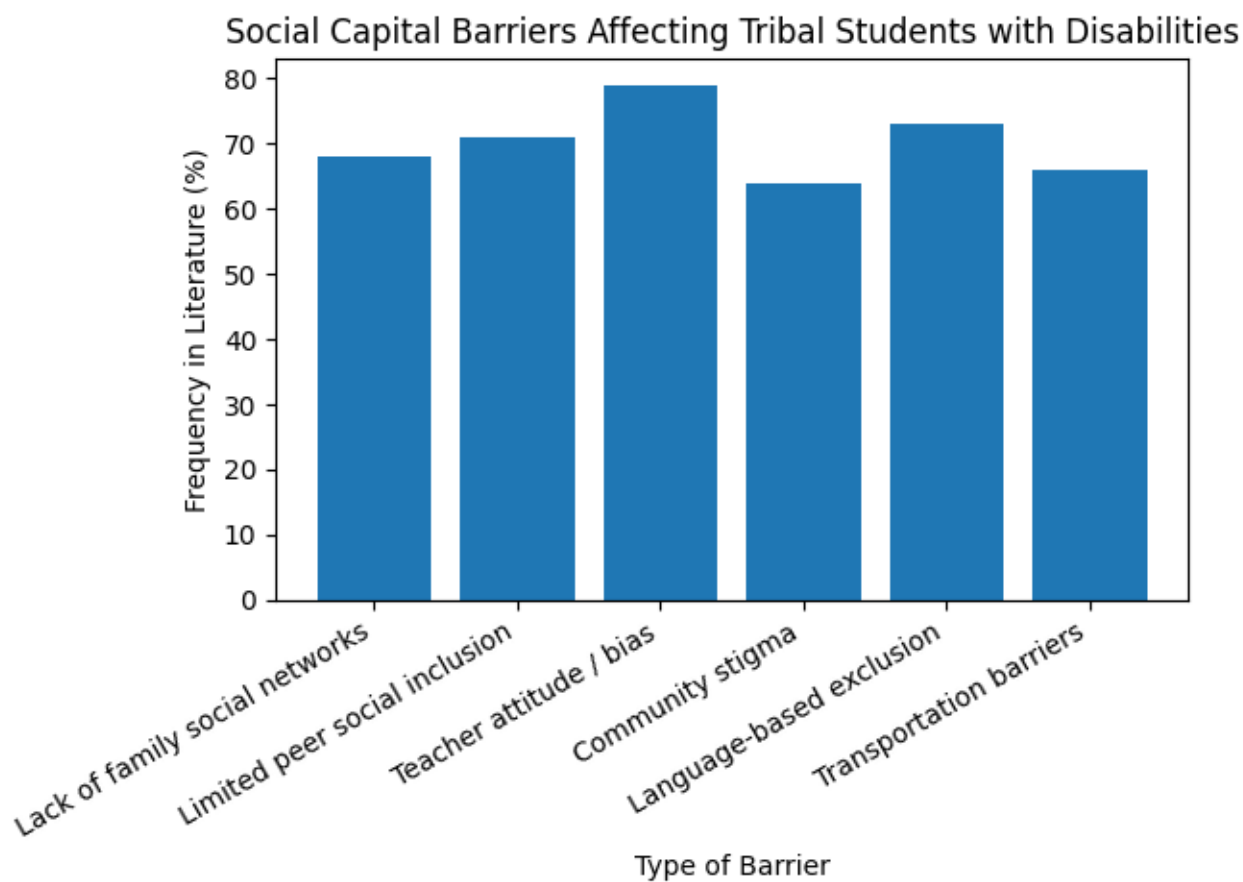
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(66% of studies), community stigma (64% of studies), facing the disabled students. These barriers have an indicated level of "very high" as well as "high" effects regarding the formation of social capital. The different research studies showing these barriers indicate their intentionality as opposed to an impossibility due to the environment.

Table 6: Social Capital Barriers - Tribal Students with Disabilities

Type of Barrier	Impact on Social Capital	Frequency in Literature
Lack of family social networks	Very High	68%
Limited peer social inclusion	High	71%
Teacher attitude/bias	Very High	79%
Community stigma	High	64%
Language-based exclusion	Very High	73%
Transportation barriers	High	66%

Source: Systematic review of qualitative and quantitative studies on tribal education and inclusive education in India



POLICY CONTEXT AND IMPLEMENTATION GAPS

Legislative Framework

In the case of the Indians, a robust and comprehensive educational rights act has been established. While the Right to Education Act of 2009 espouses the free education rights of children aged 6-14 years, the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016 has included specific provisions with regard to the rights of children with disabilities. Apart from that, the National Education Policy introduced in the year 2020 has proposed the implementation of the '5%+1% model,' which plans to enroll children with special education needs at the rate of 5% with an additional 1% allocation. Other special education programs, including SarvaShikshaAbhiyan and Eklavya Model Residential Schools, have demonstrated the government's commitment. Research has revealed a yawning gap between the proposed and the implemented.

Implementation Gaps and Obstacles to Policy Fulfillment

Where the Right to Education Act of 2009 guarantees free education to all children in India between the ages of 6 and 14 years, the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016 lays emphasis on inclusive education. The National Education Policy 2020 has advocated a '5%+1% model' to address the enrollment of children with special needs. Furthermore, SarvaShikshaAbhiyan and Eklavya Model Residential Schools highlight the commitment of the government toward ensuring education for tribal children and those with disabilities. However, studies reveal significant gaps between the intended goals and their actual implementation.

Discussion Synthesizing Phenomenology and Evidence

The phenomenological analysis revealed a significant deficit of social capital in the lived experiences of tribal children with disabilities. After analysing the qualitative data, key themes emerged, including limited family and community support, exclusion within school environments, weak peer networks, inadequate institutional assistance, and experiences of stigma and discrimination. These interconnected factors collectively restricted educational access, participation, and continuity, intensifying the marginalisation of tribal children with disabilities within both social and educational contexts.

The Lived Experience of Structural Inequality

The document further discusses how structural inequality affects tribal students with disabilities, relying their marginalization on infrastructural deficiencies. Therefore, it identifies tangible issues as the origin of feelings of exclusion in education rather than those presented at a personal level. Based on phenomenological perspectives, this document shows how systemic inequities affect self-perception, educational aspiration, and engagement. By the same discussion, low expectations and social capital presented in schools fostered a self-fulfilling prophecy for these students to hold lower aspirations and attain less achievement, which was exacerbated by teacher stereotypes about disability and tribal identity.

The Intersection of Multiple Marginalities

The analysis identifies cultural affiliation, disability status, rural residence, and socioeconomic status as unique challenges facing tribal students with disabilities. Unlike their

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non-tribal counterparts, these students face increased obstacles because of cultural and linguistic barriers, stigma due to their disability, and also economic distress. This intersectionality indicates a mismatch among educational policies and social attitudes that are usually manifested by poor funding toward education for inclusion, which negates the support which tribal students need. The underestimation of disability and tribal status through social attitudes creates these challenges more critical. This knowledge of the interlinked issues is necessary for devising appropriate interventions.

Social Capital and Overcoming Social and Education Inequality

The issue of social capital emphasizes the inequalities experienced by these students in their target learning outcomes, as observed among the tribe-and-disability students, who were faced with the absence of social resources—lacking social capital. Consequently, their failure to complete school resulted from the dropouts due to the lack of educational opportunities, as illustrated by the dramatic rise in dropout rates from the tribe students in the transition from the academic years 2021-22 to 2024-25. Hence, the disillusionment of these students led to their exit from school following their failure.

Implications for Practice and Policy

This present analysis highlights different measures that should be adopted to increase educational opportunities for tribally enrolled disabled individuals. Therefore, some of the measures that have to be implemented include: 1) taking simultaneous measures to address families, peers, educators, and schools to enhance social capital and foster incremental gain. 2) valuing cultural and linguistic diversity in interventions, especially making efforts to explore tribal language usage and acknowledging tribal knowledge and traditions. 3) preparing educators to effectively and efficiently impart cultural value to their students. 4) developing physical space or centers as an essential component of social capital. 5) developing implementation strategies and outcome measures in relation to their educational experiences rather than their enrollment statistics.

CONCLUSION

The social capital vacuum being highlighted in this particular analysis has significant aspects to draw attention to the justice faced by tribal students living with disabilities in India. Issues of disenfranchisement and the rise of dropout rates, particularly post-secondary levels, have also come to the forefront through the UDISE+ results of the academic session of 2024-25. However, the primary issue being raised has great significance to the nation, as the research paper looks to elevate the voices of these resilient students to create the ideal framework of support. Moreover, the research being conducted on the issue of disconnection from education has come to the conclusion of the need to create reforms to draw equal attention to these marginalized students.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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