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EDUCATIONAL CONTINUITY AND BARRIERS AMONG MUNDA TRIBAL COMMUNITY OF SUNDARBAN AREA OF WEST BENGAL: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT
Education plays a crucial role in promoting socio-economic development and improving the quality of life among marginalized communities. The present study examines the educational conditions, barriers, perceptions, and aspirations of the Munda tribal community in Basanti Block of South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, India. The study is based on a survey of 40 households covering a total population of 127 individuals across four villages. Primary data were collected through a self-structured household interview schedule during January–February 2026 and analyzed qualitatively. The findings reveal that although awareness regarding the importance of education is high and a majority of households support schooling, significant challenges persist in ensuring regular attendance and continuity. Financial constraints and child labour emerge as the most critical barriers, while school distance is found to be a relatively less significant issue. Government educational support schemes reach a considerable proportion of households; however, exclusion due to dropout and irregular attendance remains a concern. The study also highlights moderate educational aspirations, largely oriented toward employment and income generation, along with increasing support for girls' education. Overall, the study underscores a gap between educational awareness and actual attainment, emphasizing the need for integrated policy interventions to address underlying socio-economic constraints and ensure inclusive educational development among tribal communities.

KEYWORDS: *Munda Tribe, Educational Access, Educational Barriers, Educational Aspirations, Socio-economic Factors*

INTRODUCTION
Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of socio-economic development, social mobility, and empowerment, particularly among marginalized communities. In India, despite significant progress in expanding educational access, disparities persist among Scheduled Tribes (STs), who continue to lag behind in literacy rates, school attendance, and educational attainment. Tribal communities, including the Munda tribe, face a unique set of challenges shaped by historical marginalization, socio-economic deprivation, and cultural distinctiveness (Upmanyu, 2016; Sahu et al., 2025). These factors often create structural barriers that limit their effective participation in the formal education system.

The Munda tribe, one of the prominent tribal groups in eastern India, particularly in states like West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha, exhibits distinct socio-cultural and economic characteristics that influence educational outcomes. Studies have shown that issues such as poverty, child labour, low parental education, and limited livelihood opportunities significantly affect school participation among tribal children (Chakraborty, 2025; Das & Kujur, 2024). In addition, institutional factors such as inadequate implementation of government schemes, language barriers, and poor quality of education further exacerbate the problem (Mukherjee, 2009; Sucharita, 2025). Although physical access to schools has improved in many regions, demand-side constraints continue to play a dominant role in shaping educational inequalities.

In recent years, various government initiatives, including mid-day meal schemes, scholarships, and free educational provisions, have aimed to enhance enrolment and retention among tribal populations. However, evidence suggests that the benefits of these programs are not uniformly distributed, and issues such as school

dropout and irregular attendance remain prevalent (Bagai & Nundy, 2009; Kujur & Das, 2026). At the same time, there has been a gradual shift in community attitudes, with increasing recognition of the importance of education for improving livelihoods and social status, including growing support for girls' education.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the educational conditions, barriers, perceptions, and aspirations of the Munda tribal community in Basanti Block of South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. By focusing on household-level data, the study aims to provide a micro-level understanding of the factors influencing educational participation and to highlight the gap between awareness and actual attainment. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on tribal education and inform policy interventions aimed at promoting inclusive and equitable educational development.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the educational status and school attendance patterns among children in the Munda tribal community.
2. To identify the major socio-economic barriers affecting access to education among households.
3. To assess the level of awareness, perception, and attitudes of households toward the importance of education.
4. To analyze the accessibility of educational facilities and the role of distance in influencing school participation.
5. To evaluate the reach and effectiveness of government educational support schemes among the study population.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a survey-based research design to examine educational conditions and perceptions among households of the Munda tribal community. Primary data were collected during the period of January to February 2026 using a self-structured household interview schedule, specifically designed to capture socio-economic characteristics, educational access, and related perceptions. The study was conducted in Basanti Block of South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal, India. A total of four villages were selected for the study, namely 1 Number Char Bidyarabad, 2 Number Char Bidyarabad, 3 Number Char Bidyarabad, and 5 Number Char Bidyarabad. From these villages, a total of 40 households were surveyed, with 6 households each from the first three villages and 22 households from the fourth village. The overall population covered in the study comprised 127 individuals. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively to interpret patterns related to educational access, barriers, perceptions, and aspirations. The methodological approach ensures context-specific insights, aligning with the study's objective of understanding educational dynamics within a marginalized tribal community.

FINDINGS

Distribution of Housing Typology Among Households

The distribution of housing types reveals a pronounced predominance of semi-pucca structures, accounting for 72.50% of the total sample, followed by pucca houses at 15.00% and kutcha houses at 12.50%. This pattern indicates a transitional housing profile, where the majority of households reside in semi-permanent dwellings that combine both durable and non-durable construction materials. Such a distribution aligns with broader rural housing trends observed in developing regions, where semi-pucca housing often reflects intermediate socio-economic status and gradual infrastructural advancement (Kumar, 2022; Singh & Satheesh, 2016). The relatively lower proportion of kutcha houses suggests some progress in housing quality, yet the limited share of fully pucca houses highlights persistent gaps in access to permanent, resilient housing. Overall, the findings underscore a moderate level of housing development with significant scope for policy interventions aimed at upgrading semi-pucca and kutcha dwellings into fully durable structures.

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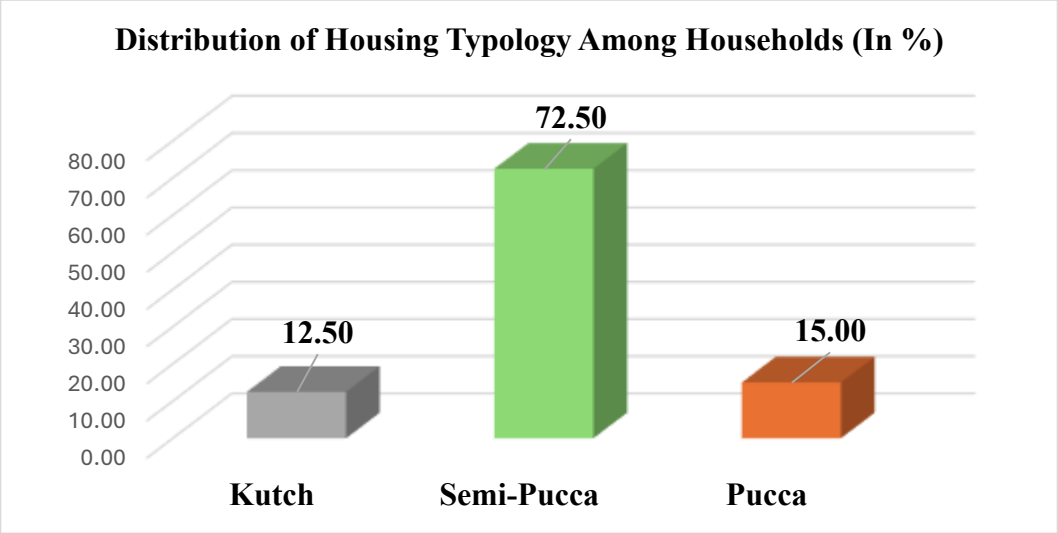


Figure 1: Distribution of Housing Typology Among Households

Distribution of Households by Family Size

The distribution of household size indicates a clear predominance of medium-sized families, with 72.50% of households comprising 4–6 members, followed by smaller households (up to 3 members) at 20.00% and larger households (7 members or above) at 7.50%. This pattern suggests that the study area is characterized by moderately sized family units, reflecting a transitional demographic structure commonly observed in developing regions, where nuclear and semi-joint family systems coexist (Bongaarts, 2001; Niranjan et al., 2005). The relatively lower proportion of large households indicates a gradual shift away from extended family arrangements, possibly due to socio-economic changes and resource constraints. Overall, the findings highlight a balanced household composition, with implications for resource allocation, housing demand, and social infrastructure planning.

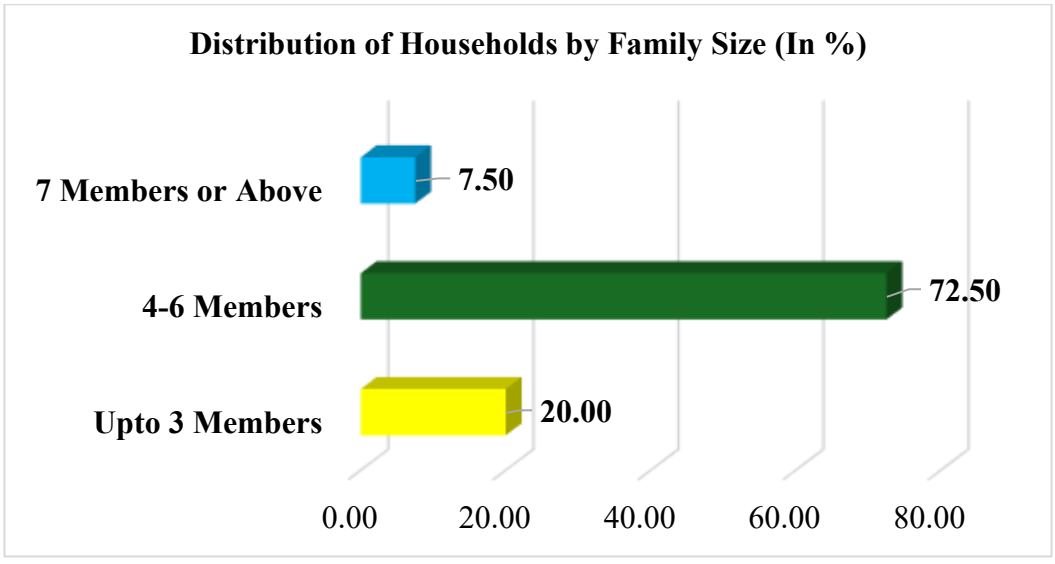


Figure 2: Distribution of Households by Family Size

School Attendance Status of Children in Households

The analysis of school attendance among children reveals that 62.50% of households reported that all children attend school, while a substantial 37.50% indicated otherwise. This suggests a moderate level of educational participation, with a notable proportion of households still experiencing gaps in universal school attendance. Such disparities are consistent with findings from developing regions, where household socio-economic status, accessibility of educational institutions, and demographic factors significantly influence school participation (Huisman & Smits, 2009; Filmer, 2007). The relatively high percentage of non-attendance highlights persistent

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barriers such as financial constraints, child labour, and limited educational infrastructure. Overall, the findings underscore the need for targeted policy interventions to enhance inclusive education and ensure universal school attendance.

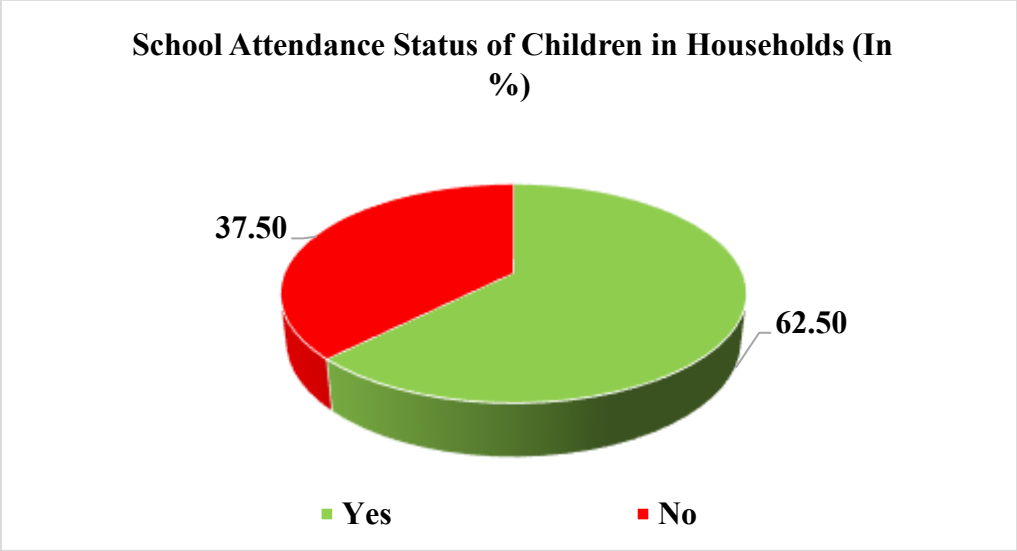


Figure 3: School Attendance Status of Children in Households

Socio-Economic Barriers to Educational Access

The findings reveal that financial constraints emerge as the most significant barrier to educational access, either independently (29.41%) or in combination with the need to work (52.94%), indicating that over four-fifths of households are affected by economic limitations. In contrast, lack of interest accounts for 11.76%, while a smaller proportion (5.88%) identified the need to work alone as a barrier; notably, distance to school was not reported as a constraint (0.00%). These results underscore the dominant role of poverty and child labor in restricting school participation, aligning with existing literature that identifies financial hardship and opportunity costs of schooling as primary deterrents in developing contexts (Putnick & Bornstein, 2015; Hannum & Adams, 2009). The negligible role of distance suggests relatively adequate physical access to schools, shifting the focus toward demand-side barriers such as household income and livelihood pressures. Overall, the findings highlight the critical need for economic support mechanisms and policies aimed at reducing child labour to improve educational access and retention.

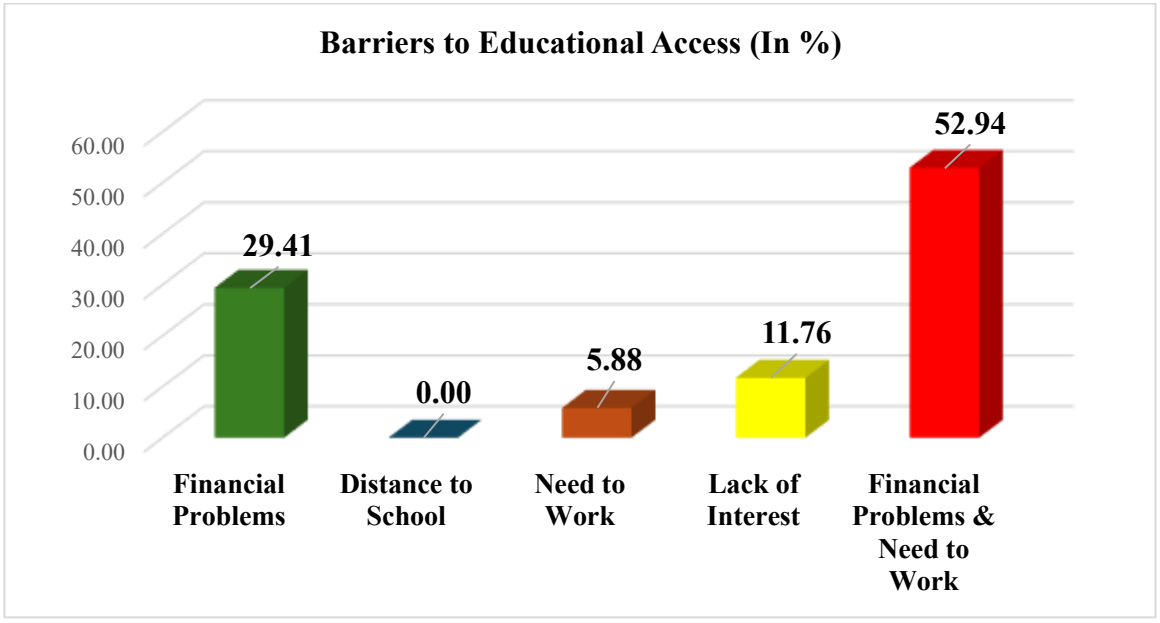


Figure 4: Socio-economic Barriers to Educational Access

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Proximity of Educational Institutions to Households

The analysis of school distance indicates that a majority of households (62.50%) reported that schools are located between 1–2 km from their residence, followed by 20.00% within 500 meters and 10.00% within 0.5–1 km. A smaller proportion (7.50%) reported distances between 2–3 km. These findings suggest that while schools are reasonably accessible for most households, a considerable segment still faces moderate travel distances that may influence regular attendance, particularly among younger children. However, when viewed alongside other findings, distance appears to be a less critical barrier compared to socio-economic constraints. This aligns with existing studies indicating that although physical accessibility matters, economic factors and household responsibilities often play a more decisive role in shaping school attendance patterns in developing regions (Filmer, 2007; Huisman & Smits, 2009). Overall, the results highlight that improving proximity alone may be insufficient without addressing underlying socio-economic challenges.

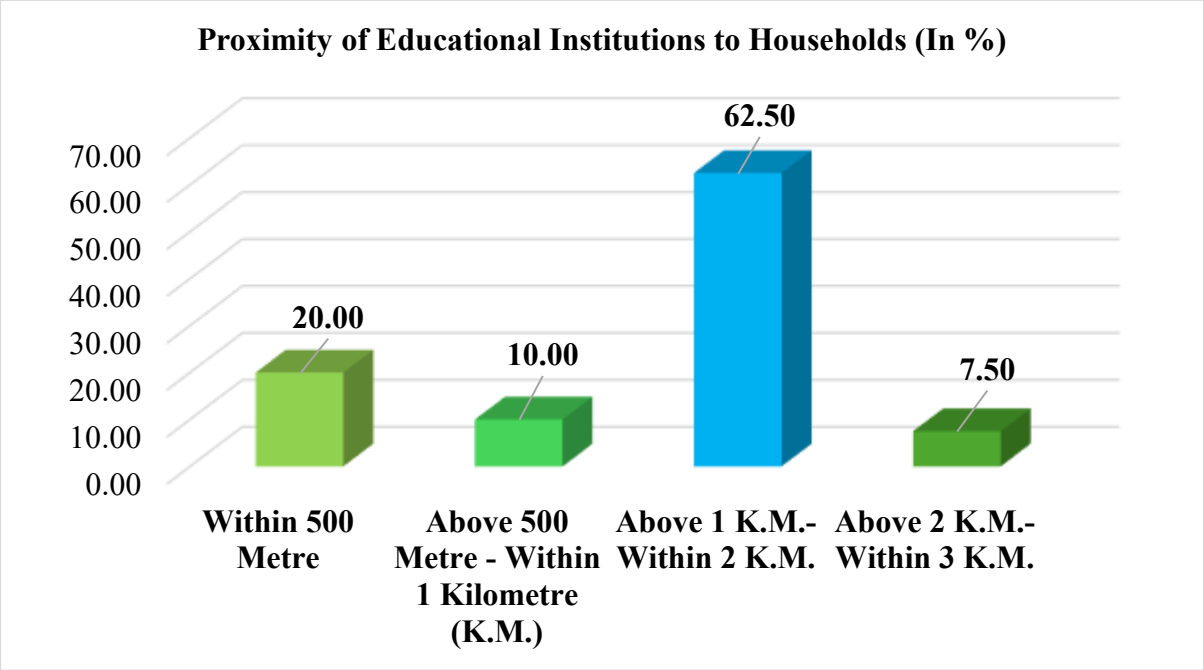


Figure 5: Proximity of Educational Institutions to Households

Access to Government Educational Support Schemes

The findings indicate that a substantial majority of households (70.00%) reported that children receive government educational support, such as scholarships and mid-day meals, while 30.00% do not benefit from such schemes. This suggests a relatively high level of outreach and penetration of government welfare programs within the study area. However, the presence of a significant proportion of non-beneficiaries points to gaps in coverage, accessibility, or awareness. Despite the availability of these support mechanisms, earlier findings on school attendance and barriers indicate that financial constraints and child labour persist, implying that existing interventions may not be fully sufficient to offset underlying socio-economic challenges. These results are consistent with prior research emphasizing that while social protection programs improve enrolment and retention, their effectiveness depends on adequate targeting and implementation (Drèze & Kingdon, 2001; Khera, 2013). Overall, strengthening the inclusivity and efficiency of such schemes remains essential for achieving universal educational access.

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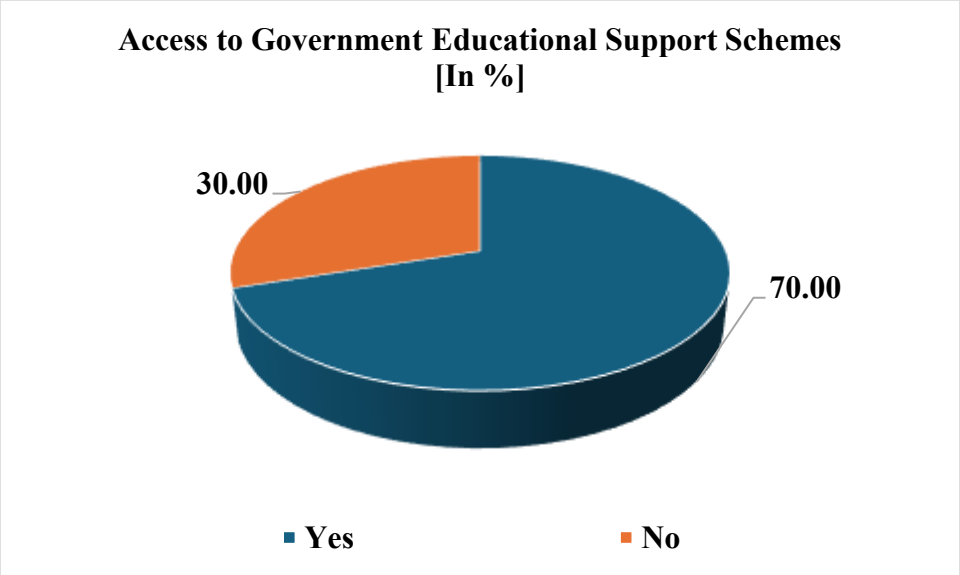


Figure 6: Access to Government Educational Support Schemes

Determinants of Exclusion from Government Educational Support Schemes

The analysis of reasons for not receiving government educational support reveals that school dropout is the predominant factor, accounting for 53.85% of cases, followed by discontinuation of education at 30.77% and irregular school attendance at 15.38%. These findings indicate that exclusion from government support schemes is largely associated with weak educational continuity and retention rather than administrative or infrastructural barriers. The high proportion of dropouts suggests that beneficiaries are often unable to sustain engagement with the education system, thereby losing eligibility for such programs. This aligns with existing literature that identifies school dropout and irregular attendance as critical impediments to accessing educational welfare benefits, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged settings. Overall, the results highlight the need for integrated policy measures that not only provide support but also ensure sustained participation in education to maximize the effectiveness of government interventions.

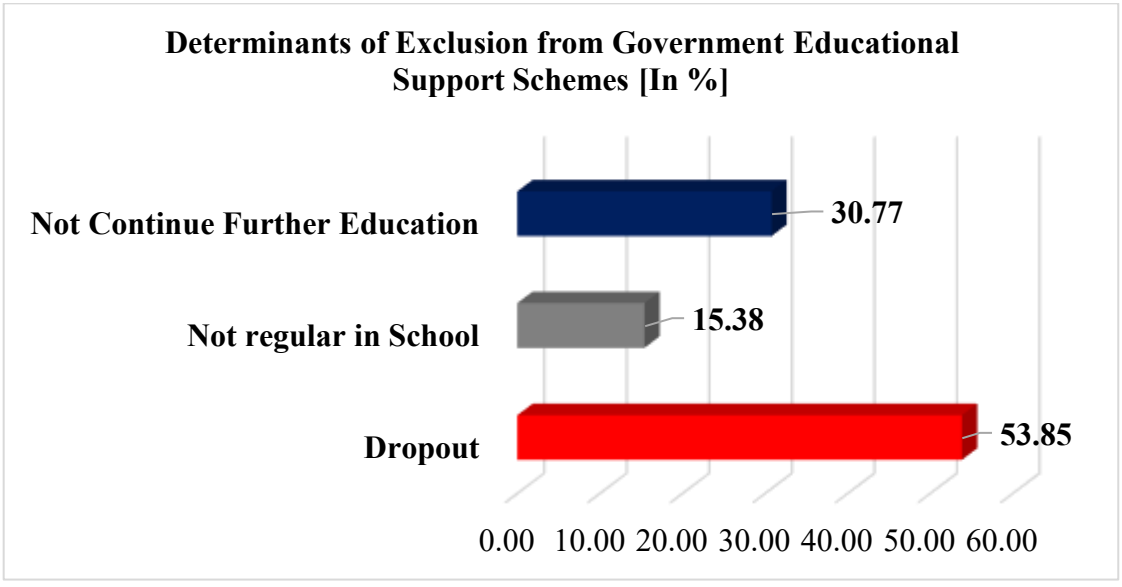


Figure 7: Determinants of Exclusion from Government Educational Support Schemes

Perception of Education as a Means of Socio-economic Improvement

The findings indicate a strong positive perception of education among respondents, with a substantial majority (87.50%) acknowledging that education is important for improving life outcomes, while only 12.50% expressed a contrary view. This overwhelming consensus reflects a high level of awareness regarding the socio-economic

benefits of education, including improved livelihood opportunities, social mobility, and overall well-being. Despite this positive attitude, earlier results highlight persistent barriers such as financial constraints and dropout rates, suggesting a gap between educational aspirations and actual attainment. This paradox is consistent with existing research, which emphasizes that favourable attitudes toward education do not always translate into sustained participation due to structural and economic limitations. Overall, the findings underscore the need for policies that not only promote awareness but also address the underlying barriers preventing individuals from fully realizing the benefits of education.

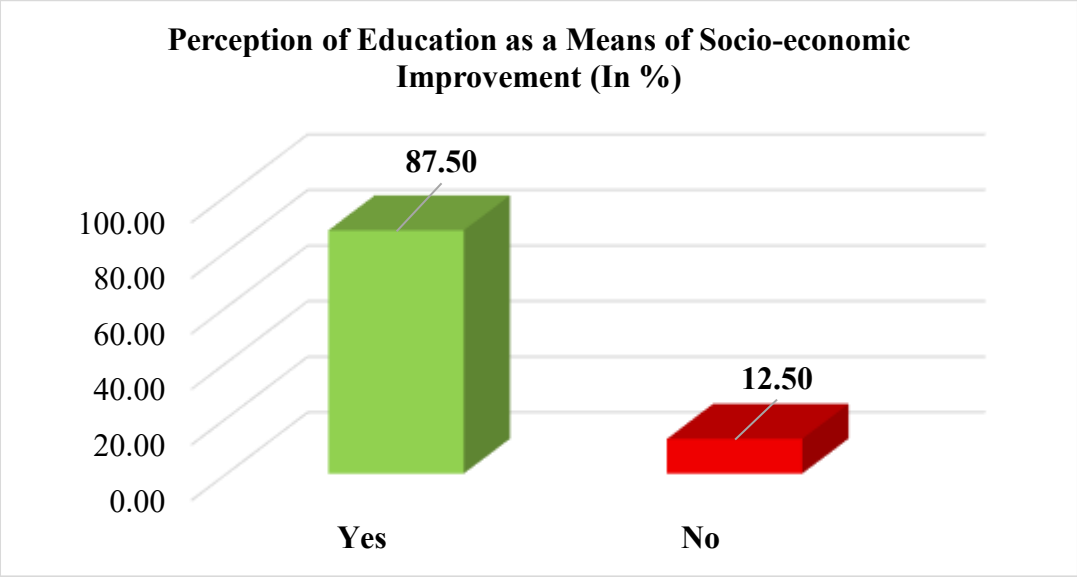


Figure 8: Perception of Education as a Means of Socio-economic Improvement

Perceived Returns and Expectations from Education

The findings on expectations from education reveal that the majority of respondents associate education with improved economic and social outcomes. Specifically, 37.50% expect a combination of better employment opportunities, higher income, and enhanced social respect, followed by 35.00% who prioritize better jobs and higher income. Smaller proportions highlighted social respect and migration opportunities (10.00%), better job and social respect (10.00%), and better job alone (5.00%), while only 2.50% associated education with both employment and migration prospects. These results indicate that economic advancement remains the primary motivation for pursuing education, often intertwined with aspirations for social mobility and recognition. The relatively lower emphasis on migration suggests that local livelihood improvement is a more immediate concern. Overall, the findings underscore that education is perceived as a multifaceted tool for both economic empowerment and social elevation, aligning with broader development literature on human capital and upward mobility.

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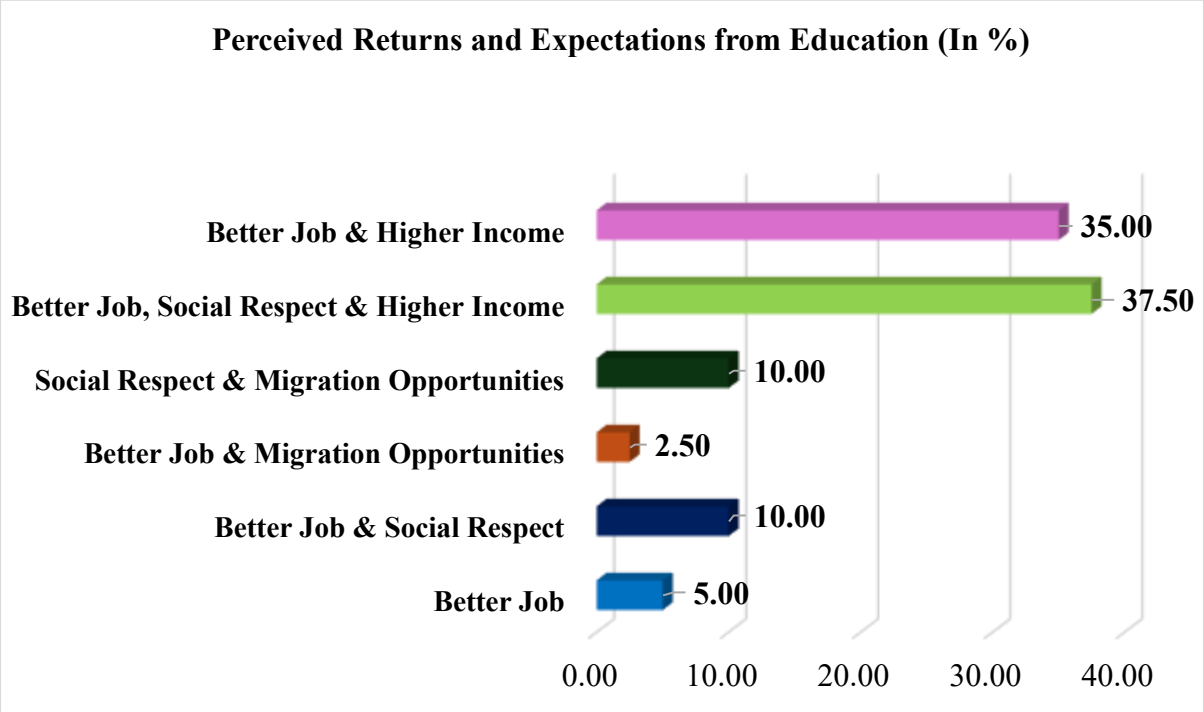


Figure 9: Perceived Returns and Expectations from Education

Household Support for Girls' Education

The findings indicate a predominantly positive attitude toward girls' education within households, with 82.50% of respondents reporting that they encourage the girl child to pursue education, compared to 17.50% who do not. This high level of familial support reflects a progressive shift in gender norms and increased recognition of the importance of educating girls for both individual and societal development. However, the persistence of a notable minority lacking such encouragement suggests the continued influence of traditional beliefs and socio-economic constraints that may hinder gender parity in education. These results align with broader research highlighting that while attitudinal changes are underway, structural and cultural barriers still affect girls' educational attainment. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of reinforcing gender-sensitive policies and community awareness initiatives to ensure equitable access to education for all children.

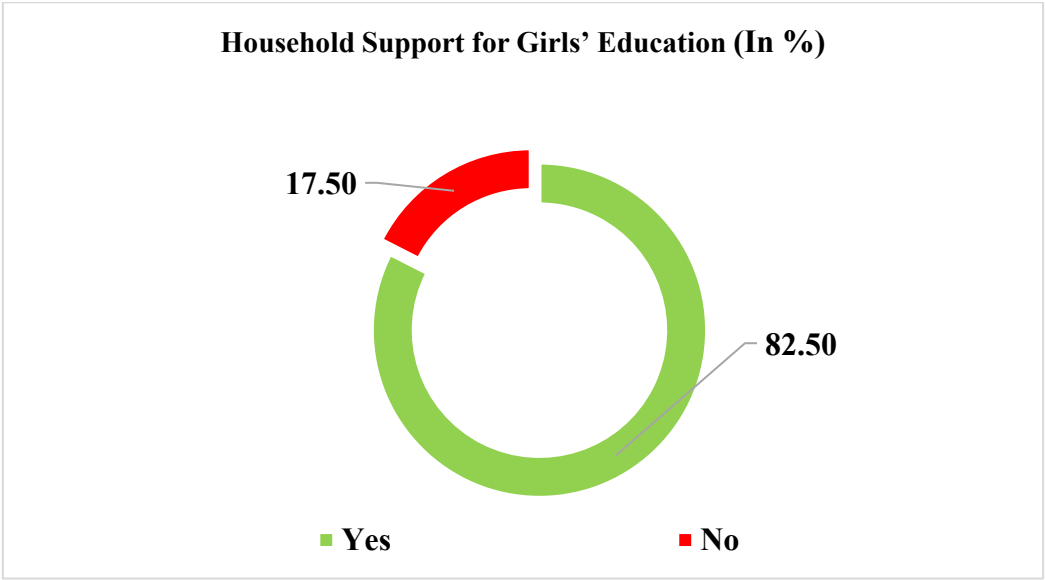


Figure 10: Household Support for Girls' Education

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Parental Educational Aspirations for Children

The findings reveal that a majority of respondents (65.00%) aspire for their children to attain education up to the undergraduate level, followed by 20.00% who prefer post-graduate education. A smaller proportion (7.50%) expressed aspirations for higher secondary education only, while an equal percentage (7.50%) aimed for advanced qualifications beyond post-graduation, such as doctoral studies. These results suggest that while higher education is widely valued, aspirations are largely concentrated around achieving basic tertiary qualifications rather than advanced academic attainment. This pattern may reflect practical considerations such as financial constraints, employment-oriented goals, and limited access to higher-level educational opportunities. Overall, the findings indicate a moderate level of educational aspiration, with a strong emphasis on employability-driven outcomes rather than research-oriented or elite academic pursuits.

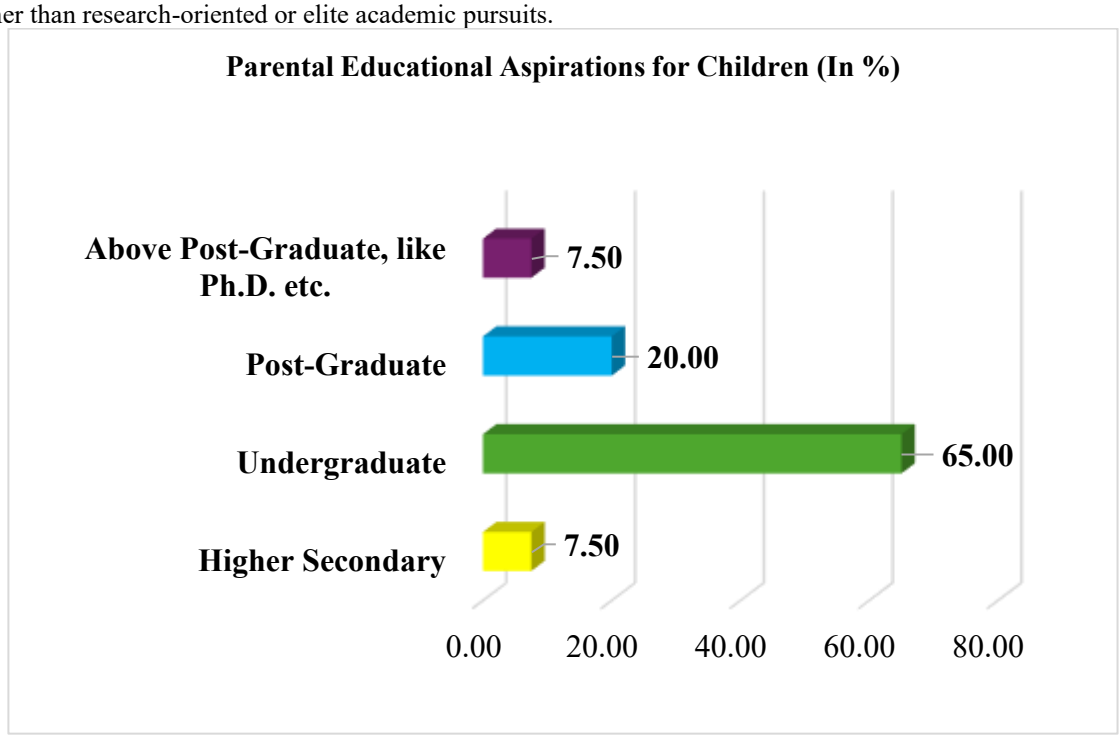


Figure 11: Parental Educational Aspirations for Children

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study highlight a complex interplay between educational awareness, socio-economic constraints, and institutional support within the Munda tribal community. Although a substantial proportion of households demonstrate a positive attitude toward education, evidenced by high levels of awareness (87.50%) and strong support for girls' education (82.50%). However, this does not fully translate into consistent school attendance and retention. This divergence reflects a well-documented gap between educational aspirations and actual participation, particularly in marginalized and economically disadvantaged communities.

One of the most critical issues emerging from the study is the dominant role of financial constraints and child labour as barriers to education. The fact that a large proportion of households cited economic difficulties, either independently or in conjunction with the need for children to work, underscores the persistent influence of poverty on educational access. This suggests that, despite improvements in school availability and proximity, demand-side factors continue to significantly hinder participation. The minimal role of distance as a barrier further reinforces that physical access to schools has improved, shifting the challenge toward affordability and livelihood pressures.

The study also reveals important insights into the functioning of government educational support schemes. While a majority of households benefit from such programs, exclusion remains a concern, primarily driven by school dropout and irregular attendance. This indicates that the effectiveness of these schemes is closely tied to sustained engagement with the education system. In other words, welfare programs alone may not be sufficient unless complemented by strategies aimed at reducing dropout rates and ensuring continuity in education.

Another notable dimension is the pattern of educational aspirations among households. While most respondents aspire for their children to achieve at least an undergraduate level of education, aspirations for higher academic pursuits remain limited. This trend suggests a pragmatic orientation toward education, where it is primarily viewed as a means for securing employment and improving income, rather than for academic or research advancement. Such perspectives are consistent with the broader socio-economic context, where immediate livelihood concerns often shape educational goals.

Furthermore, the relatively high level of encouragement for girls' education indicates a positive shift in gender attitudes within the community. However, the persistence of a minority that does not support girls' education highlights the continued influence of traditional norms and structural inequalities. This suggests that while attitudinal change is underway, it is not yet universal and requires sustained intervention.

Overall, the discussion points to a critical paradox: despite high awareness and positive perceptions of education, structural barriers, particularly economic hardship and child labour, continue to limit actual educational attainment. This underscores the need for a more integrated approach that not only promotes educational awareness but also addresses the underlying socio-economic conditions that constrain access and participation.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. The study reveals several important insights into the educational conditions of the Munda tribal community in the selected area. A majority of households reside in semi-pucca houses (72.50%), indicating moderate living conditions, while family sizes are predominantly medium, with 72.50% having 4–6 members.
2. Although 62.50% of households reported that all children attend school, a significant proportion (37.50%) still faces gaps in universal school participation.
3. Financial constraints emerged as the most critical barrier to education, either alone or combined with the need for child labour, affecting the majority of households. Distance to school was not identified as a major issue, as most respondents (62.50%) reported schools being located within 1–2 km.
4. Government educational support schemes reach 70.00% of households; however, exclusion persists mainly due to high dropout rates (53.85%), irregular attendance, and discontinuation of education.
5. Despite these challenges, awareness regarding the importance of education is notably high, with 87.50% of respondents acknowledging its role in improving life outcomes.
6. Educational aspirations are largely oriented toward achieving undergraduate-level education (65.00%), primarily driven by expectations of better employment, higher income, and social respect.
7. Additionally, there is strong familial support for girls' education (82.50%), indicating a positive shift toward gender inclusivity.

Overall, the findings highlight a contrast between high educational awareness and persistent socio-economic barriers, suggesting the need for more targeted and inclusive policy interventions to ensure sustained educational participation and attainment.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several policy and practice-oriented recommendations are proposed to improve educational access and outcomes among the Munda tribal community:

1. Since financial constraints and child labour are the primary barriers, there is a need to enhance direct financial assistance such as scholarships, conditional cash transfers, and incentives to reduce the economic burden on households.
2. Targeted interventions should be implemented to address high dropout rates, including bridge courses, remedial education, and community-based monitoring to ensure continuity in schooling.
3. Although a significant proportion of households receive benefits, efforts should be made to improve coverage, awareness, and proper implementation of schemes like mid-day meals and scholarships to ensure inclusivity.
4. Awareness programs should be strengthened to convert positive perceptions about education into sustained participation, particularly focusing on the long-term benefits of higher education.
5. Career counselling, mentorship programs, and exposure initiatives should be introduced to motivate students and parents to aim beyond undergraduate education.
6. Despite high encouragement, targeted gender-sensitive policies, including safety measures, scholarships for girls, and awareness campaigns, should be reinforced to eliminate the remaining gaps.
7. Integrated approaches involving education, livelihood support, and legal enforcement are necessary to reduce child labour and ensure children remain in school.

8. Beyond access, attention should be given to improving teaching quality, school infrastructure, and learning outcomes to make education more meaningful and engaging for students.

Overall, a multi-dimensional approach combining economic support, policy implementation, and community participation is essential to bridge the gap between educational awareness and actual attainment.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides important insights into the educational dynamics of the Munda tribal community in Basanti Block of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India. The findings reveal that while there is a high level of awareness regarding the importance of education and strong parental support, particularly for girls' education, significant challenges persist in ensuring consistent school participation and attainment. Economic constraints, coupled with the necessity of child labour, emerge as the most critical barriers, limiting both access and continuity in education despite the availability of nearby schools.

Although government support schemes have reached a considerable proportion of households, their effectiveness is constrained by issues such as school dropout and irregular attendance. Furthermore, while educational aspirations are generally positive, they are largely confined to achieving basic higher education, reflecting practical livelihood-oriented goals rather than advanced academic ambitions.

Overall, the study highlights a crucial gap between educational awareness and actual outcomes, primarily driven by underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic and integrated approach that combines financial support, effective policy implementation, and community-based interventions. Ensuring sustained educational participation among tribal populations will not only improve individual life chances but also contribute to broader goals of social equity and inclusive development.

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