

Digital Education among Tribal Children – A Study on the Effect of the Corona Pandemic.

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has forced us to choose an alternate way of living. A radical change is evident in education, trade, health and such. This coupled with the advancement of technology has accelerated the growth and popularity of digital education. Across the domains, right from the elementary classes to postgraduate degrees and more, the proliferation of digital education has grown by leaps and bounds. Media such as smartphones, televisions, PCs, etc. are used for this purpose. The one alarming concern, however, is the accessibility to these mediums, particularly for the less privileged and marginalized strata of society. The Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes of Kerala in India are no exception to this. This research has primarily relied on the indices of illiteracy, dropout rates and dilapidated conditions of these not-so-privileged communities. Quite intriguingly, despite the claims made by the authorities, there has been no proper study or research carried out pertaining to this acute issue. In light of this, we have collected data from students belonging to the tribal communities of Wayanad in Kerala. Ultimately, this study points to the fact that the pandemic has caused irreparable damage to the education sector in Kerala, causing a prodigious digital divide by fracturing the universal rule of accessible education.

Keywords: Online / Digital education; Tribal children Education; Right to Education, Digital Divide, Caste - India Untouchables; ethnic groups; tribes; Scheduled Tribes; social conditions; tribal welfare.

Introduction

“It is the education which is the right weapon to cut the social slavery and it is education which will enlighten the down-trodden masses to come up and gain social status, economic betterment and political freedom.”

– **B.R Ambedkar**. Though this quote holds much optimism, at the same time it is very unfortunate to say that the outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic has had and still continues to have serious socio-economic repercussions around the globe. With the estimated job loss reaching 400 million globally alongside a mammoth footfall in economic growth, the pandemic has devastated all forms of livelihood. With mandatory

regulations such as lockdowns and curfews, social distancing norms and enhanced restrictions on freedom of movement, the pandemic has inflicted a deadly blow on trade and commerce dismantling economic growth and prosperity worldwide. To put it another way, backwardness in education is part and parcel of the greater economic backwardness in the global pandemic.

In 1951, the literacy rate of tribals was only 3.46 per cent. The Central and State governments attach greater importance to the economic progress of the Scheduled Tribes. In 2002 the 86th amendment of constitution of India brought right to education as fundamental right in part III of the constitution, the same

amendment also inserted article 21A, which made right to education as fundamental right between the age 6-14 years, also article 45 provides that state should endeavour to provide early childhood education and care for all children up to 6 years of age. The students coming from the marginalised section of the society cannot by any means avail quality education therefore, it is important and need of the hour to pay more focused attention to pre-school education by providing adequate financial, enhancing resources, and stretching their arms in creating a good quality school which can be accessible to all children. Article 336(25) of the Constitution of India refers to the Scheduled Tribes as those communities, who are scheduled and listed under Article 342 of the Constitution. Reports of the International Labour Organization and the World Bank shed light on unemployment, malnutrition, educational inaccessibility, and other inequalities consequential to the pandemic. The direct effect of the pandemic has been devastating, notably on the vulnerable sections of society. As we can see in the various human rights reports published globally, it was observed that around 476 million indigenous people groups around the world are facing challenges to adapt to the changing environment. When it comes to education, Post 1992 the education development suggested by the National Policy of Education 1986, the flagship program which runs on three basic levels, 'primary' 'secondary' and 'tertiary', because of the complex problem at the primary level it faces in most parts of tribal India, it has a bearing of low tribal participation precisely at the secondary and the tertiary level; therefore, special attention has to be provided to the primary educations to bridge the gap and provide best to these learners. The Commission of the government namely the Scheduled area and Scheduled Tribes Commission (1960-61) chaired by Shri U.N Dheber and the Indian Education Commission (1964-66) have closely examined the low education level in tribals and found out that the problem of absenteeism, stagnation and dropouts among tribal students are greater than other social groups. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru Pleaded that the development of the tribals should be along the lines of their genius and effort should be made not to impose anything on them from outside, in addition to this the Prime Minister has also suggested promotion and encouragement to

tribal traditional art and culture, also further adjustment of the timing of schools, vacations and holidays of schools to suit the tribal social and cultural life. It also proposed creating an ambiance of tribal culture in school since most of them live with the fear of being left out of the mainstream civilization (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, 2014).

It is obvious that the impact of covid 19 was also evident in the education system of the country, resulting in the closure of the educational institutions like schools and colleges, initially, most governments had decided to completely shut down the schools to reduce and slow down the impact of Covid-19, the year 2019-2020 was the most challenging in the entire human history and also affected the education sector immensely. With mandatory regulations such as lockdowns and curfews, social distancing norms and enhanced restrictions on freedom of movement, the pandemic has inflicted a deadly blow on trade and commerce, dismantling economic growth and prosperity worldwide. Further widening the gulf between the pre-existing problems and further made it difficult for the students especially to the students coming from the underprivileged section of the society the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes, making it difficult for them to achieve their goals. Since the abrupt ending of the academic year has led to serious unfinished learning, there has been a rise in the number of dropouts of high school students, especially those coming from low-income families and marginalized sections of society such as those North-Eastern who are less likely to go for post-secondary education. The fallout because of the pandemic has severely threatened the prospect of the current generation and constrained their opportunity far into adulthood, to put it another way, backwardness in education is part and parcel of the greater economic backwardness. Students are forced to take up employment during covid 19 and many could never be able to continue their studies because of lack of income and food security as an upshot of the covid 19 outbreak.

Racial and caste discrimination have been prevalent in India from time immemorial. Times of crisis such as these reinforce such disparities among the people. This trend is visible in the case of Covid19 as well, which has triggered major unemployment and economic crumbling. In India too, with limited

options for employment and other government regulations, a large number of the tribal population is left to live their life in shackles. Their very existence was challenged as they are dependent on wages of daily labour to make their ends meet. Subsidized government food kits and supplies from civic groups turned out to be their major source of livelihood during these times. With little to no income at disposal, these groups struggled to satisfy their basic necessities.

Among them, the women and children were the worst affected. Pregnant women were left with no access to nutritious food and benevolence. Children were deprived of their nutritious diet upon the closure of schools.

As education turned digital, students belonging to these tribal communities were left outside of the educational spectrum. They were denied of their right to education enshrined under Article 21A of the Constitution of India. Without access to education, many of the children were forced into child labour under hazardous circumstances, making them vulnerable and unprotected. On top of the existing economic disparities, caste-based discriminations continue to be a major reason for the societal divide. Several studies in support of the above argument have been carried out and all beyond reasonable nexus indicates that despite the various government programs designed for this purpose, caste still stands to be the single major factor for the low educational mobility of Scheduled Tribes. Historically, the Scheduled Tribes have lived in the most remote parts of the country, inside the forests and grasslands, where there is an abundance of natural resources which can be used as a means to sustain their livelihood. This geographical isolation is yet another factor for their exclusion from mainstream news and media.

The inaccessibility to digital medium coupled with the lack of infrastructural adequacies like poor network coverage escalates the trauma faced by the students belonging to these tribal communities. Since schools ensured nutritious mid-day meals and free rations as part of the nationwide food security program, students were given a chance for overall development to curb the problem of malnutrition among vulnerable populations. This along with the real-time guidance of teachers and scope for extracurricular activities like sports and art, schools pre-covid19 used to be enriching and engaging. In fact, the school and college

dropout rates are lowest among these sects in India according to the surveys. However, with the evolution of digital education as the standard mode of education, and with the absence of personal care and mentoring by the teachers, the tormented students belonging to these communities were shadowed with depressions and doubts about their future. Online classes failed to address the need for personal care and attention.

With mounting tensions and insecurities at home, digital learning turned out to be muddled and troublesome for most of the students. Devastatingly, as a direct consequence of this, a tribal student committed suicide in India's most literate State; Kerala, for the reason that digital education was inaccessible and for the fear of being left out of the education spectrum. This suggests that despite various steps and initiatives taken by the State Government in this regard like providing tablets, smartphones, laptops and monetary incentives, etc, a large section of the students belonging to the tribal communities were not beneficiaries of any of these schemes or initiatives. With the lack of financial means to support digital education and growing concerns over the social divide, the future of these students does not look so promising unless the authorities are willing to step up and find amicable solutions to this problem. Furthermore, prolonged closure of schools can negatively impact the physical and mental well-being of such children. Prompt remedial measures must be implemented by the authorities to make sure these children are not denied their fundamental right to education.

This research paper investigates and analyses the impact of COVID 19 among Kerala's tribal communities, particularly on the pretext of inaccessibility to education. Appraising the socioeconomic conditions of these communities along with their concerns over digital education, the availability of technology to the students in the growing popularity of digital education. Mediums such as smartphones, televisions, PCs, etc. are used for this purpose. The one alarming concern, however, is the accessibility to these mediums and an in-depth analysis on the impact of Covid19 among the tribal student community is established. Based on the research data, a number of revival and rehabilitation measures are proposed for satisfying accessible education. Education, being the dream window to a prosperous future and a means to poverty

alleviation and employment, a study of this stature is vital for establishing a socio-economic development plan for facilitating the education of the tribal community in India, the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes of Kerala in

India are no exception to this.

This research has primarily relied on the indices of illiteracy, dropout rates and the dilapidated conditions of these not-so-privileged communities. Quite intriguingly, despite the claims made by the authorities, there has been no proper study or research carried out pertaining to this acute issue.

In light of this, data has been collected from students belonging to the tribal communities of Wayanad, Kerala. Ultimately, this study points to the fact that the pandemic has caused irreparable damage to the education sector in Kerala, causing a prodigious digital divide by fracturing the universal rule of accessible education. Additionally, the basic need of education in regard to human rights will be brought to light, challenges in India regarding education, the right associated with education, acts, amendment, allocation of funds and many more aspects concerning the constitution of India

The objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the impact of COVID 19 on the educational sector, the Covid crisis and the interlinkage of education and family's income disparity in low-income families specifically among the tribal students in Kerala. This paper enlists the hardships and inconveniences faced by tribal students in having accessibility to digital education. The secondary objectives include studying the digital divide caused by the Coronavirus pandemic and proposing effective solutions to overcome this issue.

Research Methodology

This study is designed in a descriptive manner. The primary data was collected with the help of a structured, open-ended questionnaire and the secondary data was collected from corresponding websites, research studies, news portals, magazines, journals and other publications. The sample population encompasses tribal students of Wayanad, Kerala with a sample size of 65. The sampling method adopted is the non-probability

sampling method along with the convenience sampling method.

Research Findings and Discussion

The data was collected from 65 students belonging to the Scheduled Tribe communities of Wayanad district in the State of Kerala, India. Based on this data, interpretations were drawn on the following themes: livelihood, digital divide and accessibility, higher education & careers, and government schemes and support measures.

1. STRUGGLE FOR LIVELIHOOD IN PANDEMIC

Tribal communities have lived and thrived across all parts of the world for millennia. From the most documented Cherokees in North America to the isolated Sentinelese in India, most of the tribes have found a way to live and coexist with nature. The world's second-largest and second most populated continent of Africa, aptly termed "The Cradle of Humanity" is where you find the largest concentration of Scheduled Tribes. This is closely followed by India, home to around 1.38

Billion people. In India, the tribal groups are primarily concentrated in: the North-Eastern region, Eastern-Central belts and in the South. With refer Scheduled to the 1961 Census, there were 212 tribal groups in India, numbering 29.88 million, roughly accounting for 7% of the total population at that time. In alliance with this, as per the 2011 census, the tribal population of the country, of 10.43 crore, constitutes 8.6% of the total population. This indicates that the growth in tribal population is in proportion to the overall population growth of India. Out of the total population, an overwhelming 89.97% of tribes live in rural areas, while the rest 10.03% occupy urban areas. This, however, is in sharp contrast with the degree of urbanization in India, where 34.47% of the total populace lives in urban areas. There are a total of 705 Scheduled Tribes in India across 30 States.

In Kerala, the number of Scheduled tribes stands at 4,84,839 which constitutes a slender 1.45 percent of the total population. The highest percentage of scheduled tribes are found in the Wayanad district, where they account for about 18.53 % of the total population, while the lowest representation is in the Thrissur district, with just over 0.3% of the population.

Evidence of privately driven social expenditure, both historically and currently, serves to minimize the role of the state in Kerala's growth story. However, a closer examination of Kerala's economic policy reveals that the state did not simply deprioritize economic growth it was hampered by progress. The workforce of Kerala is one of the most educated in the country when compared to other high performing states such as Maharashtra having its financial Hub in Centre Mumbai, Karnataka having its Tech Hub in Bangalore, and despite having what it requires, Kerala has one of the highest levels of unemployment in the country. According to the Kerala development report, during 1987-88, almost 19.8% of the Kerala workforce was unemployed versus 17.8% in the whole of India, while talking about the overall unemployment rate in Kerala, it was 11.4% versus only 2.7 percent in India (Apoorva Shah, 2010). As can be seen in the most recent study of employment, Kerala stands at 5.4% of unemployment versus the 7.1 % in India. When it comes to the employment of tribals, tribes were always close to nature and were consuming the natural resources close to the forest; livelihood dependency was agriculture and minor forest produce (Unemployment in India, 2021).

1.1. The Kerala Model

The model which is not sustainable by any means: Kerala during the 1960s had outstripped the rest of India in terms of literacy and life expectancy, but the current situation is not appealing and progressive in any context. The issue of concern is in the context of neoliberal reforms underway in India since 1991. The importance of the context is pivotal because there is a strong opinion about the preservation of socio-demographic gain of Kerala that has been preserved and the social cost of its transition to a more competitive and open economy which has been somehow effectively managed. According to Sandbrook et al (2007) When we talk about social indicators of human development, the performance of Kerala has been remarkably impressive. Whether it is female literacy rate, infant mortality rate, overall literacy rate or the ratio of females to males among the total population. Looking into the graphs and numbers, the performance of Kerala has been

popularly appreciated. The question stands whether this is looked at through the lens of how much the 'Dalit' and 'Tribals' of Kerala have been redressed. Addressing their socio-economic, sociopolitical needs are also a major aspect of a progressive civil society.

The 'Kerala Model' provides contrast to the traditional process of development which works in a sequence chain of growth, where economic growth should be given the highest priority for growth per capita output. The importance of economic growth is an integral part of other forms of development because economic growth promotes other human development. A series of scholarly inquiries started emerging from the themed-1980s, questioning the 'Kerala Model' in its increasing deficiency of economic and industrial development, making it transparent of the failure of the

'Kerala Model' in social development. The question for the model has always been asked whether it qualifies to be a model at all as it doesn't serve the purpose of attaining social development. It has created euphoria over the economically backward regions in south India. A relative concern has been shown regarding the Dalit, tribals and fisherfolks who has criticised and addressed adequately when functioning according to the 'Kerala Model' (Kurien 1995 & Omvedt 1998). The distribution of wealth resulting from social growth has been criticised as being skewed toward women (Saradamoni, 1994).

Kerala has always been subject to caste and class inequalities, having various literature published concerning the class and caste struggle in Kerala, and it is very important to address the social concern and outreach social justice for the marginalized in Kerala. Having one of the highest records of per capita concern compared to other states of India increasing progressively since 1993-94, the state is entering into a high growth regime largely accelerated by the construction and service sector. All these factors have cumulatively transformed the immoral and not so socioeconomic foundation of the unsustainable Kerala model.

1.2. Income Inequality and Poverty during the Pandemic

To start with the issue of income inequality and poverty, all the students interviewed had state issued identity cards, primarily the Aadhar

UID. Almost all the community households interviewed possessed a ration card and have been the beneficiaries of the public distribution system. This was their only source of livelihood during the time of the pandemic. The average number of members in a family was in the range of 3 to 7. Approximately, 4% of the children interviewed were the only child in their family. The majority of the students' parents were coolies or daily wage workers with 85% being the same. This includes workers who are employed in crop fields and plantations on a seasonal basis. Children were staying back home to assist their parents at work, including the female students who take part in house chores. A whopping 90% of the students are unaware of their families' monthly income. With the threat of coronavirus

pandemic, the majority of these daily wage workers were unable to find employment. Among the students interviewed, 34% belong to the Panniya Community, 45% to the Kattunaikha tribe and 31% to the Mulukurmma tribe.

Himanshu (2007) computed the all-India and state-by-state trend in poverty headcount ratio (HCR) and Gini coefficient estimates using similar NSS data from 1983, 1987-88, 1993-94, and 2004-05. It shows that in 1987-88, a definite pre-reform year, the rural Kerala HCR based on the official income poverty level was 10.3 percentage points lower than in 1983. The four-year decline was extraordinary. During the post-reform era of 1993-94 to 2004-05, however, the rate of increase in rural poverty was only 12.2 percent points.

Table: Socio-Economic Category wise Headcount Ratio of Poverty

Group	HCR
Backward Castes	21.4
Forward Caste	14.2
Schedule Caste (SC)	38.0
Schedule Tribe (ST)	38.7
Hindu	22.6
Muslim	28.7
Christian	14.0

(Source: Aravindran (2006): 78.)

The table has been made by the methodology for estimating the poverty line by the planning commission, and the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), based on the monthly per capita consumption expenditure (mpce) for the year 2004. It shows the caste-wise gap and income inequality and level of poverty between different socio-economic categories. With the present disparity in income inequality and global pandemic, the gap of poverty has widened drastically in the existing class structure.

We should investigate sustainable development programs involving these tribal people. We should never forget how tribal were

disposed and dehumanized for centuries, abstaining from their social, economic and political rights, how development projects are restricted to more wage employment, house building, mostly engaging in the non-organised sector, falling into the category of income inequality, and abstaining from good quality of life.

2. DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY OF EDUCATION DURING PANDEMIC

From 1st June 2021 onwards, the new academic year commenced digitally. The daily classes were aired on the State-run TV channel *Kite Victers*, titled *First Bell*, in accordance with the

pre-released schedule of the Education Department of Kerala. This channel was also available for viewership through mobile applications and other third-party video streaming services, such as YouTube. In addition to this, many schools mostly the private run ones, also had dedicated live classes throughout the day, hosted on online conference platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. These were the primary and only means of education happening in the state as there was no scope for physical education at schools. Owning cable connection enabled televisions or having access to smartphones or other digital gadgets with stable internet connectivity became the norm for getting educated. Due to financial constraints, lack of infrastructure, with respect to internet connectivity and digital illiteracy, this mode of education was proving to be unpleasant, inaccessible, and unaffordable to the majority of tribal students belonging to Wayanad, Kerala.

A study of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) report, an organization named Dalit Adhikari Andolan found that 56% of the students who were surveyed for the purpose of accessibility of online classes belonged to the marginalized communities having annual income ranging from Rs. 20000-40000 and were unable to access the digital or online classes during the pandemic. Along with this 73% of the respondents belong to the particularly vulnerable tribal groups who have no access to online classes during the Covid Pandemic. The report has focused on the impact of the pandemic on the Dalit and Adivasi student in achieving higher education and the multiple layers of class and class hierarchical layers, Dalit and tribal students have to overcome (Sarah Khan, 2021).

Only 46% of the students surveyed had access to digital gadgets at home. As a consequence of the above-mentioned factors, around 58% of the students were not able to attend the live classes or to view and learn from the *First Bell* on YouTube. The students who had access to television were forced to watch the classes at scheduled times, as they did not have the flexibility to watch classes at a convenient time like other students. While digital education encourages bringing universality, accessibility and convenience for all, the less fortunate people without proper means are denied access

to education altogether. About 17 male students interviewed had smartphones access prior to COVID 19, in contrast, there were only 2 female students with access to the same. This clearly leads us to our next point, the gender divide. The male students were having a clear advantage over their female counterparts in access to the digital mediums and this contributed to the gender divide in educational outreach.

It was noted that around 15% of the students had purchased a digital medium; mostly a smartphone posts the initial pandemic restriction. They had mentioned how they were forced to take the decision to buy a digital gadget or to sacrifice their studies. First, the pandemic was compelling students to buy digital gadgets and ensure internet access to facilitate their education. Owning a smartphone was more than just a need, but a necessity upon their question of survival. Not all students who had access to digital gadgets did not necessarily own one. For illustration, only 19 students had their own personal smartphones while the remaining 11 students were depending on their parents or siblings. As many students cited, owning a digital gadget was an advantage, as they had more flexibility while viewing classes and for searching additional information, as and when required. Second is the access to stable internet connectivity. Steady and uninterrupted internet connection is the core of digital education. Owing to the poor infrastructure and lack of network towers in rural India, many of the students including the ones belonging to these tribal communities were put in a dilemma. 14% of students surveyed cited poor network connection in their area while only 2% of the students had responded that the connectivity in their area was strong and uninterrupted. The price of internet data packs was also yet another crucial factor while considering digital education as most of the households did not have any disposable income, as a result of months of unemployment. Rising data charges have fuelled concerns among the students and their parents alike.

Out of the sample, 43 students had access to television at their disposal with a cable connection to view the classes on Kite Victers channel. Many of the students had concern over uninterrupted power supply, while the parents were concerned more about the rising electricity charges.

3. EDUCATION & CAREERS AMONG TRIBAL CHILDREN

The Scheduled tribes are one of the most marginalized sections in India, who are backward, educationally, economically, politically, and culturally. Among these, educational backwardness is the most pressing issue of today and the single major contributor to their social exclusion. For promoting the educational interests of the scheduled tribes, the constitution of India includes an entire article under the directive principles of the state policy, detailing that the state shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, particularly those from the SC/ST communities to protect them from any sort of societal discrimination and for ensuring equality. Article 46 says that the state shall endeavour to provide free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years. Despite continues efforts; the true objective behind this legislation is still not met. The constitution of India also imposes fundamental duties to the citizen of the country to make the country self-reliant. Article 21(A) puts the obligation on the state to assure that the education under the aegis of 'Right to Education' should reach children between 6-14 years.

It is impossible for the three organs of the state to act upon the fundamental rights without the citizens' proper support and acting upon their share of fundamental duties. Therefore, Article 51 (A) talks about the fundamental duties which are expected to be performed by the citizen although fundamental duties do not have any legal repercussions if violated, thus there is no legal enforcement if breached. In the case of *Chandra Bhavan Boarding and Lodging Bangalore V.*

State of Mysore And others, in 1970¹ the Hon'ble supreme court said that it is almost impossible for our constitution to protect all the rights of the citizens without assigning certain constitutional fundamental duties to its citizens to constitute a welfare society.

Various government reports, studies and surveys have suggested the illiteracy and lack of educational awareness among the tribal populations of the state. Most of the students

who complete their secondary schools, opt not to study further and to engage in unskilled labour, followed through generations. This effect is not directly visible in the HDI indices and state government reports, as the index of literacy is not calculated beyond schools. Even in this 21st century, the value and impact of real education are not known to these communities, and they are ignorant of the career prospects on attaining higher educational degrees. With technological and developmental changes happening at a never-before-seen pace, education would be the key to employment. This pandemic has emphasized the importance of having a skill and knowledge-based education, as most of the manual labourers were put to the plight of unemployment, whereas the educated had the option to stay and work from home and keep life afloat.

The educational prospects of the students belonging to these communities were inspected as part of this study. 17 of the students were enrolled at residential schools, out of which 9 are male and 8 are female. 47 students are enrolled at schools nearby and one among the respondent is a postgraduate student at IGNTU, Madhya Pradesh. All students are recipients of state-funded educational scholarships and are enrolled at Government-run institutes. A good majority of the respondents preferred offline classes over online education. The level of satisfaction was also very little with regard to online education. A good margin of students also felt the quality of classes was mediocre online when compared to offline classes. The major reason for preferring offline education, i.e. physical schooling is the physical comfort, followed by human interactions and the hostility of the home environment.

Another key thing to remember is the external factors that directly affect the accessibility to education. This includes the proximity of schools to tribal villages, availability of public transportation, other socio-economic factors, etc. With this in mind, the State Government has established residential schools at Kalloor, Pookkode, Kaniyampatta, Nallornadu, and Thirunelly in Wayanad district. Recently, there have been concerted efforts to establish institutions of higher excellence for the

¹ AIR 2042, 1970 SCR (2) 600

upliftment of tribal communities, such as The Institute of Tribal Studies and Research (ITSR) at Sulthan Bathery in Wayanad, an incubation center under the University of Calicut. The center now being in its nascent stage provides residential UG & PG programs in sociology. Such governmental initiatives are to be duly appreciated and promoted for raising higher educational awareness among the tribal communities.

All things considered, empowering tribal youth through education has emerged at the forefront of recent development efforts. Empirical evidence suggests that tribal children possess the basic acumen to study but lag behind in purpose and objective. A sizeable chunk of these students is first-generation literates from the community, making it difficult for them to survive in their home environment. These issues can be addressed with the assistance of well-thought-out awareness campaigns. Ever since independence, tribal empowerment has been one of the key agendas of the state. In view of that objective, a considerable amount of state revenue has been spent so that the marginalized tribal groups get better representation in society. Both the Central and State

Governments have been formulating different schemes and policies for improving tribal education. These include establishing new schools, appointing residential faculties, providing free study material, mid-day meal scheme, and at designated places, free boarding and lodging facilities.

Education Commission (1964-1966) states, "It is necessary to pay special attention to the education of children from the backward classes which include the Scheduled Castes, the Scheduled Tribes, de-notified communities and a few nomadic and semi-nomadic groups." Despite the continuous efforts of Central and State Governments, tribal education is still an alarming cause. This hostility towards education can be attested to the high dropout rates of students from tribal communities. In spite of being enrolled in schools, most of the children do not attend school regularly. Absence of consciousness among the students, parents' apathy for education, economic hardships, inadequacy, inefficiency and insincerity on the part of teachers, obsolete pedagogy, and getting employed at an early age, etc. are some among the major factors that contribute to this cause. This coupled with

under-trained teachers and educational staff creates a sense of detachment and alienation in the minds of tribal students, as they are unable to relate with them on an intellectual level. The tried and tested system of conventional education may not essentially be the appropriate pedagogy for them. Representing a significant 8.6% of the entire population, the educational prospects of Scheduled Tribes cannot and should not be looked down to. It is to be noted that only 43% of the students showed an interest in pursuing education beyond the school level, out of which a good chunk were male students. The gender divide is more transparent here, as the female respondents were reluctant to address further questions in this regard. Out of the reasons stated by the students for not wanting to pursue higher studies, financial instability topped the chart followed by existing social norms and inaccessibility to education. Yet another reason that can be inferred is the unawareness of job prospects and various state scholarship schemes available to them. The coronavirus pandemic and the fear of being left out of the educational spectrum have also contributed to this cause. Out of the respondents who shared their willingness to study further, interest was expressed to pursue a career in teaching, engineering, medicine, law enforcement among others. Half of the interviewed students were not sure about the career path they wished to pursue. Lack of awareness and proper guidance was found to be the reasons for this ignorance.

Observing the answering trends, a correlation was observed between the responses and their parent's education. Students whose parents or siblings were educated, showed more interest in completing schools and gaining employment than those without. Only 13 students had their parents or siblings with Grade 10 or above qualification. 52 students did not have anyone in their family lineage with Grade 10 graduation accolades. Free and Compulsory education is the new ground rule globally. Children across all strata, irrespective of their socio-economic background, have a right to get educated. Education is no more a privilege, but a right. It would be foolish to assume one pedagogy is universal. Education should be flexible, taking into consideration various factors such as the socioeconomic and cultural positioning of the target audience, to satisfy the one true objective. In the majority of tribes,

learning is an active, pleasurable activity carried on socially. Tribal children are introduced to the world of learning with the aid of folklore, myths, dances, riddles, and fables. The modern education system should be more open to accommodating and promoting the appropriate parallel teaching methods, thereby fulfilling the true desire of education.

4. LEGAL AND JUDICIAL DEVELOPMENT RELATING TO EDUCATIONAL

As a tool, education is the most powerful instrument for human growth. Education is also a 'Human Right', the role of educators in establishing the social order demanded by the declaration is stated in Article 26 of the UDHR: Education must be dedicated to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;

Education is a tool for human change. Right to education is inserted in the constitution by way of Article 26(1) which says, *everyone has the right to education; the constitutional mandate to provide free and compulsory elementary education to all children until the age of 14*. In order, the enactment of the Right to Education has gone through several amendments in the parliament. The state has a duty to act upon the constitutional provision and ensure that the Right to Education Reach to the disadvantaged sections of society.

4.1. Constitutional Provision Regarding Right To Education: When we talk about 'Free and Compulsory Education' The 86th amendment Act 2002 inserted Article 21-A in the constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of 6-14 years as a Fundamental Right in such a manner as a state may by law determine. The constitution of India has made the following provision under article 45 of the Directive Principles of State Policy and the state shall endeavour and has an obligation to provide within a period of 10 years from the commencement of constitution, free and compulsory education for all children until the completion of fourteen years of age. The expression 'State' here means Government and Legislature of each of the States and even the Local bodies and other authorities, including Government and Parliament of India within the territory of India under the supervision and

control of the government of India. So it is quite apparent that the universalization of 'Free and Compulsory Education' is a joint responsibility of both State and Central Government.

4.2. Education of Minorities & Weaker Section of the Society: is one of the most important components of 'Right to Education'. Article 30 of the Indian Constitution talks about the establishment and administration of institution based on their religion and language of people belonging to those community who needs special attention. The state shall provide aid to the educational institution and investigate the matter of discrimination based on language or religion against any educational institution on the ground that it is under the management of minorities. The educational interest of the weaker section of the Indian community is being protected under articles 15, 17, 46 of the constitution of India aimed at those that are socially as well as educationally backward classes of the citizen including the schedule caste and the schedule tribe of the country. The federal government has a duty to protect, and it is also one of the directive principles of state policy to promote and take special care of the educational and economic interest of the weaker section of the society, especially the schedule caste and the schedule tribe of the country. State also has the duty to protect them from social injustices and all forms of exploitation whatsoever.

The status quo of education has been changing from time to time as per the requirement and capability of the nation. Unfortunately, the right to education is not a fundamental right in India but an effort has been made to include "The Right of Children to free and Compulsory Education Act" in the constitution as a fundamental one. The 86th amendment Act 2002 inserted Article 21A in the constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right in such a manner as a state may by law determine. The change in fundamental duties has been made through article 51A which was amended and after adding clause (j) and clause (k) it becomes the duties of the parent and guardian to provide opportunities for education to his or her children who are between the ages of six and fourteen. Also, article 15 and article 29(1) provide equal opportunity to join Academies or

otherwise institutions, as under this article no citizen shall be denied admission into any educational institution on the ground of caste, race, religion, and language.

Another important factor of better learning in the marginalized, scheduled tribe and scheduled caste of the country is Instruction in the mother-tongue. We are already aware of the diversity in the language in the country, after the Independence of India the usage of the language spread across the country. However, it is recommended by the National Education Policy, that early schooling of a child should be in mother tongue which can substantially add to the reduction in the number of school dropouts. The whole process of introducing tutoring in the mother tongue in early childhood can require a whole new set of new books, fresh teachers, training programs, funding etc. looking into the multiplicity of dialects and language in India, it would be unfair to universalize one language as a mode of instruction in teaching and would therefore be unfair to the student coming from native speaking languages especially those coming from the indigenous communities.

Annual status of education report (ASER) put together by Pratham, has found that in 2019, in rural India only 16.2% of children enrolled in Grade I could read their respective textbook, while only 39.5% of the children could orally add one-digit numbers. One of the many bright sides of adding mother tongue as a mode of teaching and learning would be students would be able to articulate and frame the thoughts and emotions of people, and therefore result in comprehensive substantial development of a child. He or she would be able to express themselves in the best way possible and will further aid in two-way communication between student and teacher. It would overall boost the confidence of the students and push them to continue their education which would ultimately result in lower dropout rates. Parents would also participate and reason with their children when the mode of learning would be in their mother tongue that would develop a strong foundation and build a strong home-school partnership in their overall learning process. Teachers who majorly come from a place of non-Hindi and non-English speaking background could make the learning process more wholesome, substantial and absorbing the primary school learners. There are very limited studies undertaken on the impact of

school environment on the life of children and the result reflects the positive impact of teacher's role in shaping the student to overcome their difficulties. At the same time, the fact cannot be negated that teachers play a very crucial role and the school atmosphere is the most important factor and affects the student academic graph and henceforth decreases the school dropout (Paul G. Paris, 2014).

4.3. Implementation of Education Policy

Article 350A of the Constitution of India states that every state and local authority should provide adequate facilities for implementation of the mother-tongue at the primary level of the education of a child belonging to the linguistic minority group and people coming from the native-speaking community. When we talk about the usage of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in primary schools is not a new induction in the education system, In the report of the Kothari Commission on education and national development (1964-66) the suggestion made by the commission on tribal areas was that the medium of instruction for the first two academic years of a student should be in their mother tongue.

In talking about fundamental duties, it needs to be understood that in the aim of the interpretation of the constitutional provision, there is a relation and connection in some or the other way between fundamental rights and fundamental duties. Looking at article 21(A) and article 51 A (K) of the constitution of India, Article 21(A) puts an obligation and duty on the state that no child should be deprived of the right to education and parallelly on the other hand Article 51 A (K) puts the duty on the citizen to ensure that no children are deprived of going to the school and get access to the quality education.

4.4. Committee, Legal and Judicial Pronouncement towards Education:

Immediately after the independence of India one of the main focuses was to make an education development in the country, therefore to act upon the vision a central advisory board of education was set up, one of the oldest and the most important advisory bodies of government of India was named as 'The Central Advisory Board of Education' (CABE) established in 1920 and dissolved in 1923 and again it was revived in 1935 and has

been existing since then. The general aim of the CABE was to give advice and assist the local government in a direction to the development of the education policies provide innovative ideas across the country. Post-independence, the 'B.G Kher Committee Report, 1948' has given a brief framework such as cost of various programs and stages of Education Development of the country. The 'Radha Krishnan Commission, 1949' was another significant step toward the improvement and molding of the education system in the country. 'Mudaliar Commission, 1952' was appointed to bring substantial change in the present education system which resulted in major recommendation in secondary education their curriculum, textbooks, method of teaching, inspection, supervision and counselling at various levels. Also, an additional step was taken by the government of India by appointing an International Team of eight experts in 1954 who were known as the 'Ford Foundation Team', the team was formed to analyse and understand the greater detail of Secondary Education and give the major recommendation to the commission.

Another major committee recommendation was made by the 'Piers Committee Act, 1956' which focused on practical work which would focus on teacher training and importance given to the theoretical portion of teachers training. The 'Kothari Commission' gave a major contribution and showed keen interest in essential contribution and improvement in teachers' education at all levels at the national education level. This resulted in the making of the 'National Education Policy' in 1968.

The major precedent of 'Right to Education' as a fundamental right has been restored by the eleven-judge Constitution Bench of Supreme Court in *T.M.A Pai Foundation Vs. State of Karnataka 1994*², the court held that governments and universities cannot regulate the admission policy of the unaided educational institutions and cannot regulate the admission policy of institutions run by linguistic and religious minorities but the state can have arbitrary power to run and regulate academic affairs, at the same time the minority institution have to abide by the boards and

universities guideline to get recognition or affiliation.

Another benchmark on judicial development regarding 'Right to Education' was in public interest litigation in the case of Mohini Jain³ and Unni Krishnan⁴ when the court enforced 'Right to Education' and emphasizes the impact of certain state laws on private education, it also holds a precedent that governs the public provision of elementary education.

5. Findings & Suggestions

This research has revealed the following findings based on the study carried out under the topic, the impact of Corona virus pandemic on students belonging to the tribal communities in Wayanad, Kerala:

- The coronavirus pandemic has adversely affected the tribal student community, as education became inaccessible to them.
- The majority of the students prefer physical schooling over online classes primarily due to physical discomforts and hostile environments at home.
- In comparison, male students have better access to online education than female students. Male students are also more ambitious about higher education and employment than their female counterparts.
- Advancement and implementation of education development suggested by the National Policy of Education 1986 focuses on three basic levels, 'primary' 'secondary' and 'tertiary', because of the complex problem at the primary level it in most of tribal India, it has a bearing of low tribal participation precisely at the secondary and the tertiary level
- There is little to no scope for doubt clarification. This is impacting the quality of education.
- As a result of the ignorance and social isolation of these communities, the majority of the students are unaware of future education prospects. This results in high dropout rates among such students, which is further triggered by the impact of this pandemic.

² AIR 2372, 1994 SCC (2) 734

³ AIR 1858, 1992 SCR (3) 658

⁴ AIR 2178, 1993 SCR (1) 594

- Unemployment of parents and limited access to disposable income is affecting digital education.
- Infrastructural inadequacies like interrupted electricity and disrupted internet connectivity are directly affecting digital education.
- Ignorance and lack of awareness are widely prevalent among these communities with respect to government schemes and action plans.
- The government has not yet formulated an effective action plan to ensure the smooth conduct of digital education for the tribal students.
- The Parliament enacted the 'Right to Education Act, 2009' which was followed by the consequential litigation and precedent which made the state obligated for free and compulsory education which is guaranteed under Article 21A which will be enforced against the school defined under section 2(n) of the same Act.

Despite all these education provisions the 'Right to Education' is not receiving appropriate aid or grants to meet the expenses from appropriate governments or local authorities from charging capital fees.

- 'Right to Education' cannot be implemented and made successful to the fullest when there is no partnership between government and the parents' role in grooming their wards, which can be only made possible through proper counselling and mentoring of parents.

To ensure the accessibility to digital education, thereby soliciting progress and development for the students in the tribal community, the following suggestions can be implemented: ● Government should initiate schemes and policy frameworks to provide digital accessories and internet connectivity to the tribal students. This can be implemented with the assistance of NGOs and civic groups by organizing fundraising campaigns.

- Emergency establishment of centralized digital classrooms in tribal areas with adequate digital peripherals like televisions, computers and internet connectivity.
- Recruiting and training volunteers for facilitating as Tribal Educational Assistants. These volunteers shall be responsible for ensuring access to digital education to tribal students, addressing their queries and

concerns, coordinating activities at ground level and reporting back to the government.

- Periodic review meetings to be hosted between school authorities and parents/children through digital and physical mode. During these sessions, teachers should communicate about the student's academic performances to the parents and mentor and guide them towards improvement.
- Education sensitization and awareness campaigns for parents and students to analyze and understand the importance of education, government schemes and programs.
- Scientific review and revision on the improvement of education among tribal students, sketching the efficiency and effectiveness of government schemes and action plans, and introduction of new measures to curb illiteracy, dropout rates and inaccessibility to education.
- All state, government institutions, national and international agencies also societies should give top priorities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of this act.

Conclusion

The outcome of this survey conducted among the students of tribal communities in Wayanad in Kerala is appalling. The concept of digital education was popularized on a global scale with the advent of the COVID 19 outbreak. This was done to achieve continuity in education, despite the pandemic. However, this paradigm shift towards digital education has not reaped the desired benefits. It has actually paved the way to causing a digital divide in the society with the less privileged classes like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes being discriminated against based on financial capacity. The universal rule of accessible education is no longer put into practice. With the lack of technical access, poor internet infrastructure and allied costs of digital education, it became a nightmare for the students belonging to the underprivileged classes to keep up with their studies. This coupled with rising unemployment and the unavailability of disposable income further worsened the situation. The fundamental objectives of digital education were to provide accessibility and convenience to a broader spectrum of students by providing study from home features; audio-video embedded classes, technical expertise, 24x7 accessibility and

convenience. All of these features, however, are tagged to digital technology mediums, internet connectivity and technical expertise. These are areas beyond the reach and accessibility of the tribal community. This digital divide has caused significant repercussions among the students of tribal communities. They are living in constant fear of exclusion and thoughts of being discriminated against and left out from the mainstream educational spectrum. This divide is further deep and pervasive between various gender groups, with male students enjoying the privilege of technical expertise and enhanced access to digital devices.

This growing concern is not restricted to Kerala alone; it has overshadowed the dreams and aspirations of billions of students worldwide, mostly belonging to the marginalized strata of the society. It is dismaying to note that a Dalit girl hailing from Malappuram district in Kerala committed suicide in despair of inaccessibility to education during the pandemic period. Gender discrimination is a prominent factor affecting education during the pandemic. Likewise, multiple students had committed suicide in the states of Gujarat and Tamil Nadu due to a lack of proper infrastructure for accessing digital education.

The Central Government had introduced programs and action plans to empower female students and to curb the existing gender discriminations, the most celebrated flagship program being, “*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*”. Ironically, the majority of the budget allocated for this program (56%, Rs. 155.7 crores) was spent on advertisement campaigns during the years 2018-19. Only less than 25% of the entire budget was utilized for the actual cause with 19% of the budget remaining unutilized. The failure of such government schemes is a noteworthy policy flaw. The State Government of Kerala had introduced a program called “*Padanamuri Project*” during 2017-18 to enhance study facilities of students belonging to the SC/ST communities.

This ambitious project aimed to establish a study room alongside the students’ homes with the assistance of local self-governing bodies and the entire expenditure for construction was to be looked after by the Kerala State Development Corporation for SC/ST. The Education Minister of Kerala claimed that 99.95% of the students of the state had access to online class learning, prior to the start of this

academic year. On the contrary, the results from this survey do not align with this claim. Even with accessibility to the digital media, the question of whether online learning is effective for the students is a matter of utmost introspection.

It is to be concluded that there are major flaws in government-administered programs and schemes designed for the purpose of tribal uplift. Apart from the lapse of budget, these flaws are also directly affecting the progress and prosperity of the tribal communities, particularly the students. After conducting extensive research and studies pertaining to this matter, the government should implement tribal education programs, to ensure their sustainable development. By collaborating and cooperating with NGOs and civic groups working for this cause, the efficiency and effectiveness of such programs can be enhanced. The ensuring of uninterrupted access to education and the deliverance of awareness programs are essential for the progress of such communities. Rather than emphasizing financial benefits alone, proper guidance, mentoring and sensitization programs are to be conducted among the students for their total integration into society. By taking measures to decrease the dropout rates and to increase career awareness, economic and social equality can be achieved. Proper and timely disposal of financial grants should be the first step taken by the government in this regard. High-performing students belonging to these communities should be provided with extended grants and scholarships for higher education, along with specialized academic coaching and mentoring. Government departments and officials along with the general public should strive towards ensuring educational access to the tribal youth. This is crucial for society’s socioeconomic development.

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