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First Generation Tribal College Goers and their Learning Experiences from Childhood to Higher Education: A Case Study of Nayagram

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Abstract

The Tribals of Indian societies may be most vulnerable backward section. Their backwardness prevails in every aspect in social reality. Formal education is not normally accessed by them. In present day institutional and non institutional initiatives have explored many avenues for under privileged section of society. Education sector is no exception. Most of the tribal students enrolled in higher education are first generation learners. In the current exercise attempt has been made to explore learning experiences of tribal college goers from their childhood to higher education. The samples are collected from Nayagram community development block of Jhargram district in West Bengal, India. Nayagram, a remote community development block (CBD) has a sizable section of tribal population and their variety of cultural traditions. The major tribal communities of this CBD are Santals, Mundas, Lodhas, Sabar, Orans etc. Recently, establishment of a new Government General Degree College in this isolated area has helped young people to take benefit of higher education. This presentation reflects primary data based findings from a small sample of tribal students.

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The tribals (Adivasi) of India as like of other parts of the world may be the most vulnerable backward section of society. This locus of backwardness touches every aspect of social reality. Formal education system is not an exception. Apart from economic hindrances, socio-cultural barriers prevent the tribals of our society to make formal education a tool for making progress in their own terms. Dominant economic and socio-cultural reality and its multi level hegemony construct this hurdle more difficult. In this paper a simple endeavor has been tried by the presenter to sketch the realistic condition of a small section of first generation college goers' experiences of formal learning process. This study is exploratory and conceptual in nature.

The meaning of the concept of first generation learner has varied on the basis of situation and view point. Gosh (2014) has cited,

“First generation learners may be defined as those who of their family members have come for education for the first time in schools and their parents have no formal education at all. They come to school without any orientation. They are less ready and less prepared for the school life. They lack any guidance from any one neither at home nor there any stimulation for them to learn. They do not have the facilities for better learning as their parents fail to realize the importance of education. Their home environment is both discouraging and non-facilitating. This may result into poor academic achievement and less healthy attitudes towards life and society.”

On the other hand Awasty and Khinani (2015) introduce this notion from different perspective.

“The term ‘first generation learners’ (FGL) here refers to the students who are the first one in their entire generation to go to school and receive an education or whose parents have attended

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the formal education system up till primary level of schooling. These children face a multitude of academic, psychological, socio-economic and cultural challenges. ... first generation learners are considered as those children whose parents have either no education or dropped out after 8th grade.”

However, in this study the notion of ‘First Generation Learners’ has not only been used. Here the phrase ‘First generation College Goers’ refers to the college students who are experiencing the higher education first time among their family members. Few of their family members have experienced literacy or early formal education. For realistic findings and comprehension of the topic tribal college students of Nayagram Pandit Raghunath Murmu Government College have been selected as the universe of the study. Most of the tribal students enrolled in this institution are first generation learners. In the current exercise attempt has been made to explore learning Study experiences of tribal college goers from their childhood to higher education.

Area of Study:

Nayagram, a remote community development block (CBD) in Jhargram district, West Bengal, is socio-culturally enriched by a sizable section of tribal population and their variety of cultural traditions. The major tribal communities of this CBD are Santals, Mundas, Lodhas, Sabar, Orans etc. Recently, establishment of a new Government General Degree College in this isolated area has helped young people to take benefit of higher education. As per the Census of India (2011) Nayagram Community \ Development Block had total population of 142199 amongst them 40.01percent are tribal, whereas in national level only 8.58 percent population are tribal. Total literacy rate of Nayagram CBD is 63.70 percent (Male literacy rate 74.06% & Female Literacy rate 53.25%) considering population over 6 years of age. Literacy rate of Nayagram CBD is the lowest within Jhargram sub division (Census of India 2011). Santali is mother tongue of 55.93 percent tribal population of Nayagram CBD. Bhumijj and Munda of this CBD speak *Mundari* i.e. 17.26 percent of tribal population of this CBD. 3.85 percent *Lodha* people of this CBD speak their mother tongue (www.nayagram.nic.in).

Challenges to First Generation Learners:

In this situation little intangible consent has been composed to fulfill further discussion. This study is aimed at analyzing the challenges faced by first generation tribal college goers in the studied area and draw comparisons among these two terms of the challenges faced by respective students. These are their socio-cultural life and their formal learning environment.

“First generation learners are ‘disadvantaged learners’ who are disadvantaged from an educational and economic point of view. They are considered to be linguistically deficient, academically unsuccessful and socially and economically backward. As a result, many of these learners remain under-achievers. Due to their poor academic backgrounds, first generation learners are often labeled as ‘dull’ or ‘backward’ and this may create similar identities in such students once they accept their roles.” (Awasty and Khinani, 2015).

Based on the available studies conducted around the challenge faced by the first generation learners in India, these challenges can be categorized in five major parts:

- i. Socio-economic and cultural,
- ii. Educational environment at home,
- iii. Academic challenges inside classroom and
- iv. Psychological or non-academic challenges and

v. wider effect of dichotomy of social inclusion and exclusion.

On the basis of these five viewpoints a comprehensive understanding on the learning experiences of the first generation college goers has been tried to be reflected. ***Chief objective of the study is to explore the first generation tribal college goers' learning experiences from childhood to higher education.***

Method:

This study is completely purposive and qualitative in nature. A mixed method for collecting the data has been used. For factual understanding information from fifty (50) students has been collected. At the beginning of the study it was thought that a vivid quantitative analysis may be needed to understand the reality. However, the real situation is more in-depth subjective. So, further fulfill the aim of the study the presenter has go through a rigorous informal conversation with the respondents. Formal and informal interviews, group discussion were continued to know the real situation. With the help of the students of Sociology Honours of the college respondents' learning experiences were thoroughly documented. In the later part of this discussion a short summary of the findings is going to be cited.

Findings:

First Generation Tribal College Goers of the studied area do not constitute a homogeneous group. Mainly overall socio-economic backwardness and lack of proper educational infrastructure did compel their previous generation to be disconnected with formal education system.

Regarding respondents' journey of formal learning revolves round few parameters. These are social and economic backwardness, cultural differences, language, lack of infrastructure etc. But, the real challenge for them may be integrated hegemony of dominant colonial culture in every aspect of their life. The above stated parameters are the super structural reflections of that. Thus, it is inevitable to point out the aged long social exclusion of tribal in Indian society as well the comparative recent practice of dubious social inclusion. Thus,

“Such intervention offset all that was desired to be achieved by affirmative action programme. The latter, the state has displayed as a post-sign of tribal development. In close introspection, however, affirmative action in case of tribes tends to be no longer affirmative action, as it does not tend to lift them from the given social base in which they were traditionally located. Rather, affirmative action has been pushed through along side the processes that further deteriorated their existing social base and further exposing their vulnerability. Hence there is nothing affirmative about affirmative action programme in case of tribes in India.” (Xaxa, 2011)

Specific finding from the respondents are as follows:

Major problem they have faced in their learning journey is using academic language. Most of the respondents and their family members use their own mother tongue or local dialect for every day interaction. On the other hand from the elementary education they have to practice and use official Bengali language. Most of the vocabulary of this subject is of their daily use. In this connection most of the respondents have argued that they have usually felt ashamed and remained submissive in their classes because they cannot comprehend the teaching or communicate properly in academic sense. It is also observed by me in the classes that most of the time they cannot understand a term or word in official Bengali or English language.

“...the pattern of social interaction and relationships of any society is reflected by the language spoken by its people. In doing so language helps develop inter-human communication system.. (Chatterjee 2005).”

Because, as first generation learners most of them do not get any help to prepare lesson from their family members. This is indicated as another hindrance to their learning journey. A variety of factors include course content, methods of teaching, regular attendance, present examination system and participation activities, etc. All are responsible for academic exclusion of first generation tribal college goers from their fellow students to a great extent.

As most of the respondents are from lower socio-economic strata it has been impossible for them to make learning as the most important task of their childhood and early adulthood. They have to participate in daily chores of family work or

earning for their livelihood. Vice of gendered social practice is not uncommon in today's tribal life. So, females are still less encouraged to continue with their formal education. However, both male and female respondents are suffering from ambiguity regarding how to use their education for shaping their future life. It is not the chief way out for them. So, the formal education is not internalized with them, rather, it remains external to them. Constitutional measures and recently taken governmental initiative are helping much to encourage the tribal people to send their children for higher studies. However a gap between achievers and non-achievers may be prevailing. *“Educational engagement and school membership or social bonding exert a strong influence on educational outcome. Tinto (1987) has observed that the attrition in higher education is explained through academic and social integration”* (Ghosh, 2014). This integration can only achieved to be felt really included.

The respondents' challenges as the first generation learners may be countered following few steps. To them their inclusion of their language, essence of their ethnic identity, culture and lifestyle in their formal education system can make their educational status, achievement level and also the interest towards main stream career building more realistic and worthy. The colonial dichotomy of inclusion-exclusion may be addressed in different approach.

“Tribal students, even while they are receiving their education, must be trained to be dedicated to the service of their own people. They must help to develop their people's inner resolve to resist exploitation and to safeguard their own rights.” (Bhuriya, 1985).

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