

Educational Discrimination and Access to Schooling

An Investigative Study of the Santal Girls

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Abstract

Right to Education Act, 2009 ensures educational opportunity to all children however, after so many years since the passing of such an act, we find that the tribal children especially, the Santal girls in the specific region of Odisha are still facing educational discrimination and are denied their fundamental rights to access to education. Against this backdrop, this paper is an attempt to investigate the magnitude and the extent of educational discrimination of Santali girls of Mayurbhanj district in the state of Odisha. The findings of the study reflect the fact that there is a wide gap in the gender parity index. Further the lack of adequate infrastructure, non-conducive learning environment, deplorable socio-economic conditions of the tribal communities, apathy of teachers also causing the dilapidated of girls' education in tribal areas. The tribal girls are excluded from elementary education due to their socio-cultural disparities and barriers. Therefore, policy imperatives call for total revamp of tribal education. However, mere policy inputs will not address real educational problems of tribal girls until much emphasis put on the delivery mechanisms of these policy inputs at the grounds level. So, any policy formulations for enhancing the education of tribal girls in the tribal belt must be insisted on 'process-oriented' rather than 'purpose-oriented'.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite being one of the largest ethnic populations, tribes are the most disadvantaged sections in India and continue to lag behind in every aspect of social life—be it food, housing, health, social and physical security, and human rights issues. They are not only excluded from mainstream society due to their geographical isolation, linguistic and cultural differences, but also excluded from the formal education system. The data and evidence show that amongst the tribal population girls face acute discrimination with respect to educational access and opportunity. Owing to their social and cultural marginalisation, the higher dropout rates and lower school participation amongst the tribal girls emerge as the most conspicuous feature, which places them in the most disadvantaged position. (Das, 2020; ASER, 2014; Nambissan, 2000; Sujatha, 2000). Various national-level educational policies such as the National Policy on Education (1968, 1986, 1992 POA) flag issues related to the educational access and opportunities to be made available to the tribal children. This is iterated through various programmes such as the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), provision of opening up of Ashram Schools and the KGBV scheme.

The main goal of these developmental plans and initiatives undertaken by the government

was to bridge the educational gap between tribal and non-tribal groups. The constant and successive efforts taken both at the state and central level aimed to provide hundred per cent successes as far as access, enrolment, retention, and educational achievement of these children was concerned. Despite the concerted efforts, we failed to bridge the educational divide between the rural and urban children and achieve the intended goal and target of equity and access of educational opportunities for the tribal children, especially girls.

This paper is an attempt to explore and analyse the story of deprivation, denial, exclusion, and the discriminatory practices of the Santal community against the girl children.

TRIBAL EDUCATION, GIRLS, AND DEVELOPMENT

Most of the existing literature on tribal education outlines that the growth of tribal people could only be possible through education. Education acts as a catalyst for their social and economic development. According to Sujatha (2002), educational access for tribals can catalyse as input for economic prosperity as well as inner solidarity amongst the tribal communities. However, as a counter-argument, one of the studies highlights that education of tribals remained a secondary issue and paled in comparison to the issues related to their sustainability

and livelihood (Surajit, 1972). Numerous studies delineates that quality education brings intrinsic benefits to the lives of tribal people, especially for tribal girls (Unterhalter, 2005; Ramachandran, 2000; Sen, 2000; UNESCO, 2010). However, the ground reality presents a grim picture when we link education with the overall development of tribal girls. The data provided by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2015) pointed out that the dropout rates amongst the tribal children was very high, and there was a substantial decline in the enrolment ratio, especially amongst girls. This alarming situation has many negative consequences for girl children in tribal communities. One of the studies described that girls were not only deprived of educational facilities but were also denied rights such as the right to own a land (Das, 2020). Thus, the educational deprivation of girl children in tribal communities hampers the inclusive growth of these societies. In one of the studies, Nambissan (2000) explains that tribal girls are not so efficacious in language use. This has serious repercussions on their education and results in severe communication gaps and high dropout rates. Lack of adequate infrastructural facilities such as separate toilets for girls, presence of women teachers in the classrooms and existence of schools in the nearby vicinity coerces them to withdraw from schools right after primary grades, and makes conspicuous on the already existent

gender divide (Gaurang, 2012). The financial hardships faced by the family act as a major deterrent in the tribal girls' education (Ghosh, 2007). In general, the trend of dropout rates among tribal girls at primary, upper primary and secondary levels was much higher than the general population in the last decade (Census, 2011).

THE CONTEXT: MAYURBHANJ THE TRIBAL BELT OF ODISHA

The study is descriptive cum analytic in nature. While the whole district was taken as a unit of analysis, but the Tiring and Jamda block were chosen for data collection and field study. The rationale for selecting these two blocks (out of 26 blocks) was because of the fact that there existed a huge gap in the male-female-literacy rates amongst the Scheduled tribes as per the Census of 2011–28 per cent and 27.48 per cent respectively. Tiring and Jamda blocks are situated in the extreme northern part of the Mayurbhanj district adjacent to the East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand that falls in Santal Prangans. The physical distance of these two blocks from the district headquarters falls within a radius of 100 km.

One of the interesting features of the Mayurbhanj district was that the tribal literacy rate of both boys and girls was higher compared to other districts of the state. This was because of three main reasons— the King of Mayurbhanj was the first King in Odisha and contributed

immensely to the development of his people by spreading the educational awareness amongst them. Secondly, the Britishers converted the Adivasi community of Mayurbhanj into Christianity. Therefore, the district became home to many Christian missionaries who stayed back to spread the teachings of Bible and Christianity amongst the tribal population. Since Mayurbhanj was declared as a Scheduled Caste and Tribal district of the state post independence, the government took several measures to promote literacy and education amongst the tribal people through the initiation of different educational programmes under the banner of the ST and SC Welfare and Development Department.

However, the latest data shows that the gender wise tribal literacy

rate is neither significantly lower nor higher. The detailed description (Table 1) of the literacy status of tribal people in Mayurbhanj explains that the total average female literacy of Mayurbhanj is 52.71 per cent, and the average female literacy rate of tribal girls is only 40.71 per cent with a disparity of 12 per cent. The very fact that 12 per cent of tribal girls are lagging behind the other girls on an average is a matter of serious concern. Further, the gender gap in literacy amongst the tribals is wide and alarming. For boys, the literacy rate is around 65 per cent, and for girls, it is almost 41 per cent. Table 1 also indicates that over the last ten years, i.e., from 2001 to 2011, no significant improvements have been made to bridge the gender wise literacy gap.

Table 1
The Literacy Rate of Mayurbhanj District in Gender-wise

Indicators of Literacy		2011 Census	2001 Census
The Over All Literacy Rate			
Male Literacy	(7 years and above)	73.76	63.8
Female Literacy	(7 years and above)	52.71	35.0
Gap in male-female literacy rate		21.05	28.8
The Literacy Rate among Scheduled Tribes			
Male Literacy	(7 years and above)	64.9	56.3
Female Literacy	(7 years and above)	40.71	22.9
Gap in male-female literacy rate		24.19	30.8

*Source: Census Reports of India, 2011 and 2001

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Thus, understanding this uneven schooling profile of tribal girls in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, the objectives of this research study were to:

- To find and analyse deep-seated socio-cultural biases and apathy towards school education of girls in Santal communities.
- To study the life experiences of Santhal tribal girls on their schooling process.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The design of the present study is descriptive cum analytic in nature. To investigate the educational deprivation of tribal girls in the specific context of the tribal belt, this research design has analysed the conditions, structure, practices as well as the relationships that exist amongst the stakeholders of the tribal society. Observational technique and case study approach have been used in this research to analyse and examine the ground realities. Moreover, observation and interview schedules have been used for the purpose of data collection. Applying the observational technique and case study approach in this study, the questions were framed in such a manner just to explore the dynamic process of girls' schooling and their school exclusion with reference to their daily life experiences in the socio-cultural contexts of tribal

societies. Hence, the aim of the study was to focus on the process of schooling experiences of tribal girls in relation to their familial contexts, a case study approach was used with the small sample. Initially, 40 tribal girls were chosen to take their interviews but finally 25 girls have given proper responses which were recorded for final analysis. In addition to this, 20 parents were also interviewed for the present study. The questionnaire consisted of 12 open-ended questions. The questionnaire explored different socio-cultural dimensions on the schooling of tribal girls. The sample selection was done in two phases. In the first phase, 40 tribal girls were identified and first-hand information was collected about their socio-economic backgrounds. During the second phase, an extensive case study was conducted on 20 girls to unravel the causative factors of their educational discrimination. The interviews conducted on the sample girls who were in the age group of 6 to 17 years. These girls were interviewed individually. The interviews were conducted in the homes as well as in schools where girls were enrolled themselves. However, the interviews were also conducted with parents to explore the educational discrimination of tribal girls in their society. Further, in the analysis section, in addition to the primary data, secondary sources have also been incorporated to address our research questions in this study.

OBSERVATIONS

Tribal girls are educationally deprived and discriminated against on many grounds when we talk about issues related to educational access, quality, retention, achievement, and equity. While analysing the educational situations of girls in general and tribal girls' in particular, the following observations are pertinent.

From the figures in Table 2, it can be drawn easily that the literacy rate of girls in both the districts is almost 50 per cent less than the literacy rates of boys. Thus, access to education for these girls is a challenging task as it is very difficult for these girls to battle against the age old prejudices and discriminatory practices which act as serious impediments from attaining what is rightfully theirs.

Table 2
Literacy Rate in Jamda and Tiring Blocks

S.No	Blocks	Total		
		Male	Female	Total
1.	Jamda	56.71	31.20	48.18
2.	Tiring	65.38	31.05	47.94

*Source: Census Reports of India, 2011

The situation of out-of-school children in the concerned areas is another example of educational deprivation of the marginalised tribal girls. The figures (Table 3) indicate

that in both these blocks the majority of out-of-school children are girls than boys in the age bracket of six to fourteen years.

Table 3
Out-of-School Children (6–14 yrs) in Jamda and Tiring Blocks, 2007–08

S.No	Blocks	ST			Total		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1.	Jamda	12.7	14.2	13.4	11.2	13.8	12.4
2.	Tiring	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.4	2.1	2.3

*Source: District Human Development Report (Government of Odisha), 2011

GENDER PARITY INDEX IN JAMDA AND TIRING BLOCK

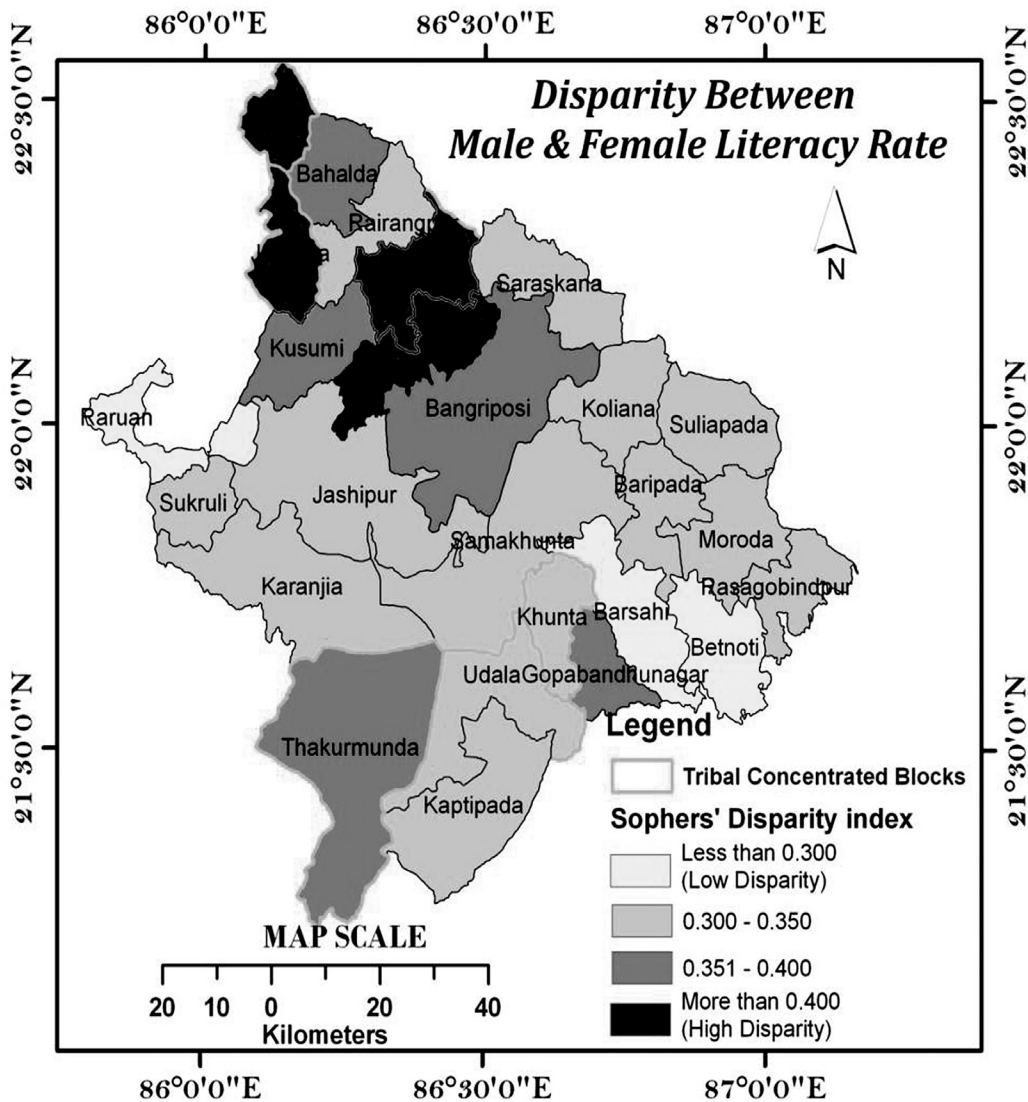
Gender parity in education is a distant dream for all the girl children of the total Mayurbhanj district. One evinces a grim picture when

we see stark gender disparity at block levels.

The census data of 2011 and the Sopher's Disparity Index model (Fig.1) by Jana and Ghosh (2015) clearly indicate that in addition to

Bisoi and Bijatola blocks, Tiring and Jamda were the two blocks where we can see the highest number of educational disparities between girls and boys. The data

clearly indicates that the tribal girl children are relatively more vulnerable than boys with respect to attaining educational access and opportunities.



(Source: Jana & Ghosh, 2015, pp. 08)

SCHOOLING ACCESS AND TRIBAL GIRLS

Despite the mapping of areas wherein schooling and educational facilities can be made available, the idea of constructing a school building in the tribal areas becomes difficult due to the rough and hilly geographical terrain. Additionally, the scattered habitation of the tribals over a vast area makes accessibility to schooling quite difficult. The Tiring block is divided into seven clusters of schools; most of the schools are inaccessible to the tribal girls and are situated far away from their homes as is the case with a particular primary school in this block. The primary grade tribal children have to commute almost 4 km every day from their respective villages to reach this school. The long distance and tiring commute results in their absence from schools and coerces them to drop out. Some of these schools are located on the outskirts of the village near the bank of a local river. Lack of proper roads and unfriendly location of the school makes the learning space inaccessible for children. During the rainy season, the situation becomes worse, and children are forced to stay at home. Further, the school does not have a separate toilet facility for girl

children, and they use the open fields to defecate. Lack of infrastructural facilities compromises on the safety and security of the girls and makes them vulnerable to abuse, for the local boys and male members behave and pass lewd comments when they see them defecating in open spaces. The same situation prevails in the upper primary school of a village in Jamda block. Almost half the students are tribal girls in this school and parents hesitate to send their pubertal girls to schools as there are no separate toilet facilities for girls. In one of the narratives, a particular parent expressed his views:

“We don’t like to send our daughters to school because they are now mature and have attained puberty. Who will protect them from the rural male youths when they go outside to defecate? Since the school does not have separate toilets for girls, we withdrew our girls from the school.”

This statement is also supported by the larger quantitative data obtained from the narrative analysis and conversation with the parents, who emerge as the major stakeholders and decision makers about the education of their girls.

Table 4
Multiple Regression Analyses

Predictors	School Dropping out	
	R ²	B
No separate toilet for girls	0.45	0.36**
Non-availability of High School		0.22**

** Prediction is significant at the 0.01 level

The multiple regression Table 4 indicates that dropout is significantly determined by the non-availability of separate toilets for girls in the school. Similarly, the 'non-availability of high school' as a predictor suggests that dropping out of school is also predicted significantly by the non-availability of high school in these localities. In this Table, it is observable that R^2 value is 45, which means 45 per cent of children dropped out of school due to non-availability of girls' toilets and also non-availability of high schools according to parents' views.

Thus, problems related to infrastructure compromised largely on the safety, security, health, hygiene and sanitation of the girls. Educational spaces were perceived as unsafe by the parents of these children and thus these girls were forced to perpetually remain in the cage of illiteracy and deprived of their educational rights.

TRIBAL GIRLS AND CLASSROOM PROCESSES

The concept of classroom processes is a vast one that encompasses the dimensions of the teaching-learning process, classroom transactions, teacher-student interactions, peer interactions, etc. Out of these dimensions, teacher-student interactions are of utmost significance when we analyse the incidence of educational discrimination of tribal girl children in their schooling process. During the course of

classroom observations in a few schools in both the blocks, teachers had a very unapproachable and unfriendly attitude towards the tribal girls. The lack of communicative skills and proficiency in the state language made the tribal girls feel insecure and further impeded their interaction with their teachers. A girl from the primary grade described her experience, "We hardly interact with teachers. Most of our teachers are from non-tribal communities. They don't like us and always scold us when we fail to give answers in class. Teachers laugh at us whenever we try to say something in class. They always make a mockery of our dialect and blame us as they feel we are learning nothing and wasting the school's time". The demotivating attitude of the non-tribal teachers compel many of the first-generation learners to remain absent from schools. Teachers' favouritism towards the boys from the tribal communities was also observed during the course of two classroom incidents. When the girls were asked to comment on the indifferent attitude of the teachers against them, then the truth came out. According to them, male teachers liked the tribal male students because they used to get free and comfortable services like massaging of their heads and legs. Stark biases are reflected through several studies which explain how girls are subject to unjust treatment in schools (Jha and Jhingran, 2005; Ramachandran, 2003; Nambissan, 2000).

An interaction with a Santali girl from the Jamda block revealed that the linguistic barrier prevented them from comprehending the classroom transactions. These barriers create a negative impact on their psyche and lower their self-esteem and confidence level of such children coercing them to drop out of school. The field observation indicated that most of the tribal girls internalised their teachers' negative attitudes so much that it made them feel as they were weak and dull students (Lakra, 2012; Sujatha, 1996).

The teachers' apathy towards the girl children of the tribal belt can be well explained by Krishna Kumar (2014) who has pointed out that they are just 'meek dictators' in the classrooms. In one of the incidents, it was observed that during the course of the regular class, one of the teachers deliberately ignored the responses of the girl students as they were not able to complete their homework on time. The empathetic and humanitarian lens was missing from the classroom as the girls were subjected to ridicule and humiliation by the teacher, who didn't bother to find out the actual reason for not submitting the work on time. For instance, a girl student of class VII was scolded for not solving a simple arithmetic calculation. The lady teacher said to the girl: "You don't want to study, but coming to school just to play. At home, also you play and do other work but do not study. Why are you coming to school when

you don't wish to study? Why don't you ask your parents to marry you?"

There were multiple instances which highlighted the absence of cordial classroom environment in schools. This observation also coincides with the previous studies by Lakra (2012) who observed the lived experiences of tribal children in the classroom. According to her observations, she pointed out that teachers used the conventional pedagogy of teaching emphasising rote memorisation and repetitions, and students were punished for failing to do so. She has vividly explained how the *adivasi* students became victims of the classroom transactions and power politics practised by teachers.

Community Perceptions and Tribal Girls

Apart from these classroom-related issues, community perceptions about the education of tribal girls are another big challenge which impedes the equal educational opportunities for girls from the tribal communities. The tribal males were not in favour of educating the girls and wanted that they should lend a helping hand to their parents by working in paddy fields. During the course of conversation with the fathers of these girls along with the other community members, it was pointed out by one of the girl's fathers, "Why should our girls go to schools and what benefits they will get back? One day they will go to their in-laws' house and will do the cooking and other domestic

chores, so they should get involved now in such activities instead of going to school". The other members of the community had expressed similar views about girls' education. Only two of them were in favour of educating the girls to the primary level. As one of the fathers revealed—"We want our daughters should know reading and writing at the basic level, so that they can read and write the letters to their husbands in future. Now-a-days our boys are going to school and doing some small jobs in towns so they want to marry a girl who should know basic reading and writing. However, we want to educate our daughters not beyond primary as it would be difficult for us to find a suitable tribal educated groom for her marriage in future". The deep seated gender bias is reflected through the negative attitude of the community members who favoured education of sons over daughters. The socio-cultural prejudice led to the denial of educational rights for tribal girls.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

According to the OPEPA Report (2013) (Odisha Primary Education Programme), the dropout rates amongst tribals are very high. The data revealed by the same authority points out the grim situation of tribal girls in the district by flashing the figures that show that 29 per cent of children drop out of schools by Class 5 while 77 per cent by Class 10. Similarly, the analysis of the results of the present study indicates that there is a wide

gap in the gender parity index in both the selected blocks of the Mayurbhanj district. The tribal girls are excluded from elementary education due to their economic and socio-cultural disparities and barriers. Thus, it becomes imperative to suggest certain intervention strategies which might make education accessible to the tribal girls. Inclusion of tribal girls in mainstreaming education and also in tribal sponsored schools of state government (like the Kanyasharma, Balika Adarsh Vidyalaya, etc) in particular, calls for revamping the whole education system in the tribal belt of Odisha. Thus, for enhancing the education of tribal girls, the state has incorporated several recommendations and suggestions at the policy level. But in spite of such policy interventions, government has failed to implement and monitor these policies at the ground level. For instance, at large numbers, many Kanyashram schools were opened in different parts of tribal Odisha in general and Mayurbhanj in special to provide educational facilities to the tribal girl children. But these kanyashrams failed to retain the tribal girls for longer times. In his study (Panda, 2019) have pointed out that the persistence of unhygienic situations in the residential complexes of Kanyashrams pushed the girl children to remain out of school children. Similar was the case with KGVB and Eklavya Model Residential Schools. The present study field data also revealed similar

facts. In the study areas like Jamda and Tiring blocks in spite of having one Kanyashram, two Eklavya Model Residential Schools, and three KGVBs, the educational situations of Santal girls are in a dilapidated condition. The field study data revealed the fact that the majority of the Santal girls in primary school left before completing the primary and upper primary schools (Das, 2020). Many of these school-going girls dropped out in the mid of the academic session and joined as child labourers. Thus, despite these special measures being introduced to achieve targeted results in elementary education among the tribals, the literacy rate of tribal children in general and Santal girls, in particular, have not reached a significant level. The occurrence of the incidents like long absenteeism, drop-out, and seasonal migration by the tribal children made their educational aspirations a distant dream (Das, 2020).

Thus, need of the hour is that the state will not only to make the roadmap of future tribal education just merely mentioning the equitable, universally accessible, and affordable quality education in the policies but also need to work on the dynamics of delivering these things at the ground levels. Therefore to deliver policy inputs, the educational and institutional measures must be introduced such as context-specific massive retention drive programmes at the district level, creation of student-friendly learning environment at the school levels,

and skill enhancement programmes in the tribal-dominated areas, all of which might result in the reduction of dropout rates and practise of gender based discrimination in education.

Second, the non-tribal teachers must undergo sensitisation, training and counseling programmes before they are posted as teachers in tribal areas. This would enable them to easily understand the needs and problems of the tribal children and take appropriate actions to resolve their problems with empathy and care. More female teachers must be appointed in these areas so that they serve as role models for the girl children and the entire tribal community and succeed in motivating and supporting the girls to continue with their education.

Moreover, teaching pedagogy can be made innovative and attractive to make the learning process more meaningful, context based and applicable in their day today life. Also, mother tongue or home language should be used as a medium of communication in the classrooms so that the children do not experience linguistic alienation. Most of the tribal children in the Mayurbhjan district speak Santali language as their native language and also developed their own "*Al Chiki*" script. Thus, the parents and their children prefer to read textbooks written in "*Al Chiki*". Therefore, in order to make the curriculum relatable, comprehensible and interesting, it

is advisable to produce and print the school textbooks in “*Al Chiki*”. Last, but not the least, a community awareness building programme must be undertaken to sensitise the members of the tribal community towards the education of girls. An equitable and gender just cannot be created without the support of its community.

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