

Socio-Economic Conditions and Development Challenges of Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka: A Study of Education, Livelihood and Social Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Scheduled Tribes constitute an important but historically disadvantaged section of Karnataka's population. Although constitutional safeguards, reservations, welfare programmes and targeted development interventions have improved several socio-economic indicators, substantial inequalities remain in education, livelihood security and social inclusion. This study examines the socio-economic conditions and development challenges of Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka, with particular attention to educational attainment, employment, regional disparities and access to development opportunities. The study employs secondary data from Census 2011, Government of India reports, Government of Karnataka publications, UDISE+ and the Fiscal Policy Institute, supplemented by evidence from recent primary household research on tribal human development in Karnataka. The findings indicate considerable improvement in literacy, elementary enrolment and educational expenditure, but gender, regional and rural-urban disparities continue. Tribal communities in economically disadvantaged districts experience weaker educational outcomes and livelihood opportunities. The study argues that inclusive tribal development requires geographically targeted investment, culturally responsive education, livelihood diversification, effective implementation of welfare programmes and stronger participation of tribal communities in development planning.

Keywords: Scheduled Tribes; Karnataka; Tribal Development; Education; Social Inclusion

1. Introduction

Scheduled Tribes represent communities that have historically experienced geographical isolation, limited access to productive assets, educational disadvantage and restricted participation in mainstream economic and political institutions. Their socio-economic position cannot, therefore, be understood merely through income or employment indicators. Education, livelihood security, access to public services, land and forest resources, gender equality and participation in decision-making together determine the quality of tribal development. The High Level Committee on the Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India emphasised that tribal disadvantage is multidimensional and must be examined through economic, educational, health and social indicators rather than through a single measure of poverty (Xaxa, 2014).

Karnataka provides an important setting for examining these issues. According to Census 2011, the Scheduled Tribe population of Karnataka was 4,248,987, constituting approximately 7 per cent of the state's population. The state has 50 Scheduled Tribe communities and two Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), namely Jenu Kuruba and Koraga. A substantial proportion of the tribal population continues to live in rural areas, making access to schools, markets, healthcare, transport and livelihood opportunities particularly significant.

Education has improved considerably. ST literacy increased from 48.27 per cent in 2001 to 62.08 per cent in 2011. Male literacy increased from 59.66 to 71.14 per cent, while female literacy increased from 36.57 to 52.98 per cent. Nevertheless, the gender gap remains significant. Recent research also demonstrates that educational disadvantage among tribal communities is connected with poverty, geographical isolation, gender norms, school environment and cultural factors.

The present study therefore examines three interconnected dimensions education, livelihood and social inclusion to assess whether improvements in formal development indicators have translated into broader socio-economic empowerment.

2. Background of the Study

The socio-economic condition of Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka is shaped by a combination of historical, geographical, economic and institutional factors. Tribal communities are distributed across different ecological regions of the state, including forest areas, hilly regions and rural settlements. The diversity of tribal communities also means that a uniform development strategy cannot adequately address their needs.

The Census 2011 profile shows that 4.25 million people in Karnataka belonged to Scheduled Tribes. Of this population, 3.43 million lived in rural areas and about 0.82 million in urban areas. Thus, nearly four-fifths of Karnataka's ST population was rural in 2011. This rural concentration has important implications for education, employment and public-service access.

The educational situation has improved substantially over time. Karnataka's ST literacy rate rose by nearly 14 percentage points between 2001 and 2011. However, the overall ST literacy rate of 62.08 per cent remained considerably below the state's overall literacy rate of 75.60 per cent. Female ST literacy was only 52.98 per cent compared with 71.14 per cent among ST males. The disparity becomes more pronounced when district-level differences are examined. Districts such as Raichur and Yadgir have historically recorded weaker educational indicators, while several districts in the southern and coastal regions have performed relatively better.

Livelihood constitutes another major challenge. Many tribal households depend on agriculture, agricultural labour, forest-related activities, wage labour and informal employment. Such livelihoods are often vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations, limited access to markets and inadequate productive assets. Changes in forest governance, land-use patterns and economic transformation can also influence traditional livelihood systems.

Government intervention has expanded through the Tribal Sub-Plan, scholarships, residential schools, hostels, Eklavya Model Residential Schools, skill-development initiatives and livelihood programmes. Karnataka's SCSP/TSP legislation has further institutionalised targeted financial planning. However, differences in district-level expenditure and educational development suggest that allocation alone does not guarantee equal outcomes.

3. Government Records and Statistical Details

Government records indicate that Karnataka had 4,248,987 Scheduled Tribe persons in 2011, representing about 7 per cent of the state's population. Approximately 3,429,791 ST persons lived in rural areas, compared with 819,196 in urban areas. Karnataka has 50 Scheduled Tribe communities and two PVTGs—Jenu Kuruba and Koraga. ST literacy increased from 48.27 per cent in 2001 to 62.08 per cent in 2011. Male literacy reached 71.14 per cent and female literacy 52.98 per cent in 2011. Government data also show substantial improvement in elementary enrolment, although dropout and inter-district disparities remain.

4. Methodology

The study follows a descriptive and analytical research design. Secondary information has been obtained from the Census of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of Karnataka, Fiscal Policy Institute, UDISE+ and relevant academic studies. Particular attention has been given to population distribution, literacy, gender disparities, elementary education, dropout rates, public expenditure and district-level differences.

The study also incorporates evidence from recent primary research on tribal human development in Karnataka. Nanjunda, Premakumara and Venugopal's recent study used household-level primary data covering 1,255 tribal households and examined health, education and livelihood dimensions of tribal human development. This provides an important contemporary primary-research perspective alongside official statistical sources.

5. Research Gap

Existing research has examined tribal education, welfare programmes and regional disparities separately. However, relatively limited attention has been given to the interrelationship between education, livelihood and social inclusion within Karnataka's tribal communities. There is also a need to connect official statistics with recent household-level evidence and examine whether increased public expenditure is producing equitable development across districts.

6. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Scheduled Tribe Population in Karnataka, 2011

Indicator	Population	Share/Observation
Total ST population	42,48,987	About 7.0% of state population
Rural ST population	34,29,791	80.7% of ST population
Urban ST population	8,19,196	19.3% of ST population
ST male population	21,34,754	50.2%
ST female population	21,14,233	49.8%
ST communities	50	Officially notified communities
PVTGs	2	Jenu Kuruba and Koraga

Source: Census of India (2011); Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India.

The table demonstrates that Karnataka's tribal population is predominantly rural. More than four-fifths of ST persons lived in rural areas in 2011. This has direct implications for development planning because geographical distance can affect access to secondary schools, higher education, hospitals, markets, financial institutions and formal employment.

The nearly balanced male-female population also indicates that tribal development policies must incorporate gender-sensitive interventions rather than treating the tribal population as a homogeneous category.

Table 2: Literacy among Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka

Category	2001 (%)	2011 (%)	Increase
ST Male	59.66	71.14	11.48 percentage points
ST Female	36.57	52.98	16.41 percentage points
ST Total	48.27	62.08	13.81 percentage points
ST Rural	45.26	58.99	13.73 percentage points
ST Urban	64.57	74.82	10.25 percentage points
Overall Karnataka	67.04	75.60	8.56 percentage points

Source: Fiscal Policy Institute, Government of Karnataka, based on Census of India data.

The literacy rate of ST communities increased substantially between 2001 and 2011. Female literacy recorded a particularly strong improvement, increasing by more than 16 percentage points. Nevertheless, the gender gap remained considerable: ST male literacy was 71.14 per cent compared with 52.98 per cent for females. The rural literacy rate also remained substantially below the urban rate. These differences indicate that expansion of school access has not completely eliminated social, geographical and gender-related barriers.

Table 3: Elementary Education Gross Enrolment Ratio of ST Students

Academic Year	ST Boys (%)	ST Girls (%)	ST Total (%)
2015–16	99.51	99.00	99.26
2016–17	98.46	97.19	97.84
2017–18	102.21	98.93	100.60
2018–19	105.20	102.00	103.60
2019–20	105.20	103.40	104.30
2020–21	105.10	104.10	104.60
2021–22	107.10	106.00	106.50

Source: UDISE+; Fiscal Policy Institute, Government of Karnataka.

The data indicate a significant improvement in elementary-level enrolment. The ST GER increased from 99.26 per cent in 2015–16 to 106.50 per cent in 2021–22. The improvement among girls is particularly important because it indicates narrowing gender differences at the elementary level. However, GER above 100 per cent should not be interpreted as universal completion or high learning achievement. It may include students outside the official age group. Therefore, retention, transition to secondary education and learning outcomes must be considered alongside enrolment.

Table 4: Dropout Rates among ST Students

Year	Primary Boys	Primary Girls	Primary Total	Upper Primary Boys	Upper Primary Girls	Upper Primary Total
2015–16	3.62	3.54	3.58	4.03	3.87	3.96
2016–17	2.11	1.49	1.80	5.03	6.94	5.95
2017–18	4.27	4.97	4.61	7.56	10.10	8.79
2018–19	0.26	0.25	0.26	1.12	2.21	1.64
2019–20	1.35	0.85	1.11	3.10	3.08	3.09
2020–21	0.66	0.17	0.42	2.29	2.15	2.23
2021–22	0.74	0.59	0.67	1.72	1.82	1.77

Source: UDISE+; Fiscal Policy Institute, Government of Karnataka.

The overall trend shows a substantial decline in ST dropout rates between 2015–16 and 2021–22. Primary-level dropout declined from 3.58 per cent to 0.67 per cent, while upper-primary dropout declined from 3.96 per cent to 1.77 per cent.

However, fluctuations during 2016–18 demonstrate that retention is not automatically guaranteed by enrolment. The relatively higher upper-primary dropout rate also suggests that transition beyond the primary stage remains a policy concern.

Table 5: Evidence from Recent Primary Household Research on Tribal Human Development

Dimension	Primary research evidence	Research implication
Coverage	1,255 tribal households	Household-level evidence provides a more detailed picture than aggregate statistics
Tribal diversity	Study covers tribal communities across Karnataka	Development strategies must recognise community-specific differences
Education	Education examined as a component of tribal human development	Literacy alone is insufficient to assess educational empowerment
Livelihood	Household livelihood forms part of human-development assessment	Employment and income security must accompany educational expansion
Health	Health included alongside education and livelihood	Tribal development requires a multidimensional human-development approach

Source: Nanjunda, Premakumara, and Venugopal (2025), *Rooted Identities: A Study on Tribal Human Development in Karnataka, South India*.

The primary household research is significant because it moves beyond state-level averages and examines tribal human development through household evidence. Its multidimensional approach reinforces the argument that tribal development cannot be reduced to literacy or school enrolment. Education, livelihood and health are interconnected. A household may experience improved school access while continuing to face livelihood insecurity or inadequate access to healthcare. Therefore, development interventions should be integrated at the household and community levels.

7. Major Findings

The first major finding of the study is that Karnataka has made measurable progress in the educational development of Scheduled Tribes, but educational equality has not yet been achieved. ST literacy increased from 48.27 per cent in 2001 to 62.08 per cent in 2011. This represents substantial progress and demonstrates the contribution of expanding school infrastructure, scholarships, residential facilities and targeted educational programmes. Female literacy also increased considerably, from 36.57 per cent to 52.98 per cent. However, the 18.16-percentage-point difference between male and female literacy in 2011 shows that gender inequality remains an important dimension of tribal educational disadvantage. Second, rural location continues to influence educational opportunity. Nearly 81 per cent of Karnataka's ST population lived in rural areas in 2011. Rural communities often experience greater distances to secondary and higher educational institutions, weaker transport connectivity and fewer employment-linked educational opportunities. Consequently, improvements in elementary enrolment do not necessarily ensure progression into higher education.

Third, the study identifies substantial inter-district variation. Government research indicates that districts such as Raichur and Yadgir have occupied lower positions in educational indicators, while several districts with stronger educational development have comparatively higher public expenditure and better outcomes. The relationship is not perfectly linear, but the concentration of weaker outcomes in economically disadvantaged regions indicates that state-wide averages can conceal serious local inequalities.

Fourth, elementary education enrolment has improved significantly. ST GER increased from 99.26 per cent in 2015–16 to 106.50 per cent in 2021–22. This suggests that access to elementary schooling has expanded substantially. However, enrolment should not be treated as equivalent to educational achievement. Learning quality, attendance, transition to secondary education, language barriers and family economic conditions remain relevant.

Fifth, dropout rates have declined but retention remains a concern, particularly at the upper-primary level. ST primary dropout fell from 3.58 per cent in 2015–16 to 0.67 per cent in 2021–22. Upper-primary dropout declined from 3.96 per cent to 1.77 per cent. The continuing difference between elementary access and later educational progression suggests that interventions should increasingly focus on secondary and higher education rather than concentrating only on primary enrolment.

Sixth, financial allocation has increased, but regional disparities in expenditure remain. The Fiscal Policy Institute's analysis shows that nominal per-capita expenditure under the TSP increased substantially over the period studied. Nevertheless, differences exist between districts and administrative divisions. In 2020–21, per-capita TSP expenditure was ₹3,573 in the Bengaluru division, ₹3,139 in Belagavi, ₹2,336 in Mysuru and only ₹1,775 in Kalaburagi. Such differences are important because the districts with weaker educational development often require greater rather than smaller investments.

Seventh, livelihood insecurity remains central to tribal marginalisation. Education cannot produce sustained social mobility when households remain dependent on unstable wage labour, low-productivity agriculture or vulnerable informal employment. Tribal development therefore requires stronger integration between education, skill development, livelihood diversification, market access, land rights and social protection.

Eighth, tribal development needs to become more participatory and culturally responsive. Recent research on Karnataka demonstrates that tribal human development involves education, livelihood and health simultaneously. Similarly, research on tribal and disadvantaged adolescent girls in northern Karnataka has identified family, community, school and gender-related barriers to educational continuation. Therefore, policy design must incorporate local community participation rather than treating tribal households simply as beneficiaries of government schemes.

Finally, social inclusion requires more than welfare delivery. Reservations, scholarships, residential schools and targeted budgetary allocations are important, but long-term inclusion depends upon access to quality education, productive assets, dignified employment, public services and decision-making institutions. The evidence suggests that Karnataka has established important institutional mechanisms for tribal development, but the next phase must focus more strongly on outcome-based, district-specific and community-led development.

8. Suggestions and Policy Recommendations

Strengthen district-specific tribal development planning: Government programmes should move from uniform state-level planning toward district- and community-specific strategies. Districts with low ST literacy, weak educational development and high livelihood vulnerability should receive priority in financial allocation. Planning should use indicators such as ST school-age population, literacy, female literacy, dropout, household income and distance from educational institutions.

Give greater attention to secondary and higher education: The strong improvement in elementary enrolment demonstrates that access at the initial level has expanded. The policy priority should now shift towards secondary, higher secondary, vocational and higher education. More tribal hostels, scholarships, transportation facilities, mentoring programmes and career guidance centres are required.

Reduce the gender gap: Although female ST literacy has improved substantially, the gender gap remains significant. Special programmes should address girls' transition from primary to secondary education. Safe transportation, residential facilities, sanitary facilities, scholarships and community awareness programmes should be strengthened. Families should also be involved in encouraging girls' continued education.

Improve the quality of education: High enrolment does not necessarily imply high-quality learning. Tribal children may face language differences, inadequate learning support and culturally disconnected curricula. Local knowledge, tribal history, culture and languages should be incorporated wherever appropriate. Teacher training should prepare educators to work effectively in culturally diverse and geographically isolated communities.

Strengthen livelihood diversification: Tribal development programmes should support sustainable agriculture, minor forest produce, livestock, handicrafts, eco-tourism where appropriate, entrepreneurship and skill development. Market linkages are particularly important because production without assured markets does not necessarily increase household income.

Improve access to welfare schemes: Awareness and documentation barriers can prevent eligible tribal households from accessing government schemes. Local facilitation centres, mobile service units and community-based organisations should assist households with scholarships, pensions, identity documents, banking, insurance and livelihood schemes.

Strengthen implementation of TSP: The Tribal Sub-Plan should be monitored not only through expenditure but also through measurable outcomes. Government departments should publicly report allocation, release, expenditure and outcomes by district. Independent social audits and community monitoring can improve accountability.

Prioritise PVTGs: Jenu Kuruba and Koraga communities require particularly sensitive interventions because their historical and socio-economic conditions differ from those of larger ST communities. Development programmes should prioritise housing, health, nutrition, education, livelihood security and culturally appropriate service delivery while protecting community autonomy and dignity.

Promote tribal participation: Tribal representatives should participate meaningfully in the design, implementation and evaluation of development programmes. Community knowledge should be treated as a development resource rather than as an obstacle to modernisation.

Develop an integrated tribal human-development database: Karnataka should develop a regularly updated district-level database covering education, health, employment, income, housing, land ownership, welfare access and social inclusion. Such a database would enable evidence-based allocation and help evaluate whether government expenditure is producing measurable improvements.

9. Conclusion

The socio-economic development of Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka presents a mixed picture of progress and continuing inequality. The evidence demonstrates meaningful improvement in literacy, elementary enrolment and educational expenditure. ST literacy increased from 48.27 per cent in 2001 to 62.08 per cent in 2011, while elementary GER reached

106.50 per cent in 2021–22. Dropout rates have also declined substantially. These developments demonstrate the positive contribution of constitutional safeguards, targeted welfare programmes, educational interventions and the Tribal Sub-Plan.

Nevertheless, aggregate progress should not obscure persistent inequalities. Female literacy remains considerably below male literacy, rural communities continue to face structural disadvantages, and educational outcomes vary significantly between districts. The concentration of lower educational indicators in economically disadvantaged districts demonstrates the importance of geographically differentiated planning. Similarly, improvements in elementary enrolment do not automatically ensure secondary-school completion, higher education or secure employment. The livelihood dimension is equally important. Education can facilitate social mobility only when households possess adequate economic security and access to productive opportunities. Tribal development must therefore connect education with skill development, employment, entrepreneurship, land and livelihood rights, market access and social protection.

The study also establishes that social inclusion should be understood as a multidimensional process. The participation of tribal communities in planning and decision-making is as important as the delivery of government benefits. Recent household-level research further supports a multidimensional approach incorporating education, livelihood and health. Karnataka has developed significant institutional mechanisms for tribal development, but the future policy challenge is to improve the effectiveness, equity and accountability of these interventions. Development should be assessed not simply by expenditure or enrolment but by improvements in learning, household livelihood security, gender equality, access to public services and participation. A district-specific, community-centred and outcome-oriented approach can therefore provide a stronger foundation for achieving inclusive and sustainable development among Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka.

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