

# Livelihood Security and Educational Continuity among Tribal Children:

*Linking Education, Employment, and Social Protection in India*

**Dr.Siddaraju V.G**

Associate Professor

Centre for Study of Social Inclusion

University of Mysore, Mysuru – 570 006, Karnataka

Email: drsiddarajuv@gmail.com

## Abstract

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of human development and social mobility. In India, despite significant expansion of educational infrastructure and policy initiatives aimed at universalizing elementary education, tribal children continue to experience disproportionately high rates of school dropout and educational discontinuity. This paper critically reviews existing literature, policy frameworks, and empirical evidence to examine the central role of parental employment in sustaining tribal children's education. The review argues that school dropout among tribal children cannot be understood merely as an educational failure but must be situated within broader socio-economic conditions, particularly employment insecurity, poverty, migration, and child labour. Drawing on national policies such as the National Child Labour Project and Samagra Shiksha, as well as international experiences—especially the family-centred approach adopted in Italy—the article highlights the limitations of child-centric interventions that overlook household economic realities. The review advocates for an integrated, family-centred policy approach that links education, employment generation, and social security to ensure sustainable educational outcomes for tribal children. Strengthening parental livelihood security emerges as a critical pathway for advancing educational inclusion, social justice, and inclusive growth in India.

**Keywords:** Tribal education, parental employment, school dropout, child labour, inclusive growth, family-centred policy.

## 1. Introduction

Education occupies a central position in India's development discourse, both as a constitutional commitment and as a strategic investment in human capital. Over the past few decades, India has made notable progress in expanding access to schooling through policies such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and more recently, Samagra Shiksha Scheme. Despite these initiatives, educational outcomes remain deeply unequal across social groups. Among the most affected are tribal communities, who continue to experience persistent disadvantages in access, retention, and completion of schooling.

Empirical evidence consistently shows that tribal children have lower enrolment rates, higher dropout rates, and weaker learning outcomes compared to the national average (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Xaxa, 2011). School dropout among tribal children remains alarmingly high, particularly at the upper primary and secondary levels. While conventional explanations often focus on inadequate school infrastructure, language barriers, or quality of teaching, such factors alone fail to fully explain the scale and persistence of the problem. Increasingly, scholars and policy analysts argue that tribal children's educational discontinuity is closely linked to the socio-economic vulnerabilities of their families, especially the precarious nature of parental employment.

This review paper examines the relationship between parental employment and the continuity of tribal children's education in India. It argues that educational interventions that are detached from livelihood security are inherently limited in their impact. By synthesizing academic literature, policy documents, and international experiences, the paper underscores the need for an integrated approach that places parental employment at the centre of educational sustainability for tribal children.

## 2. Tribal Communities and Educational Disadvantage in India

Tribal communities, constitutionally recognized as Scheduled Tribes, constitute over eight percent of India's population. Despite this significant demographic presence, they remain among the most socio-economically marginalized groups. Historical processes of displacement, forest alienation, and exclusion from mainstream development have shaped the contemporary realities of tribal life.

Educational indicators reflect these structural disadvantages. Literacy rates among Scheduled Tribes are consistently lower than the national average, with sharp gender and regional disparities. Dropout rates are particularly high at the transition points from primary to upper primary and from upper primary to secondary education (Government of India, 2022). Studies indicate that economic compulsion, seasonal migration, and child labour are among the most significant drivers of educational discontinuity in tribal areas (Thorat and Newman, 2010).

Crucially, tribal education cannot be understood in isolation from livelihood patterns. Most tribal households depend on forest-based activities, subsistence agriculture, casual wage labour, or other informal and seasonal occupations. These livelihood systems are inherently unstable, leaving families vulnerable to income shocks and forcing children into labour as a survival strategy.

## 3. Parental Employment as a Determinant of Educational Continuity

Parental employment plays a crucial role in shaping children's educational trajectory. Stable and dignified employment enables families to meet basic needs, invest in education, and view schooling as a viable pathway for upward mobility. Conversely, employment insecurity often compels families to prioritize immediate survival over long-term educational investments.

In tribal contexts, parental employment is characterized by informality, low wages, and seasonality. Forest-based livelihoods are increasingly constrained by environmental degradation, restrictive forest policies, and market uncertainties. Agricultural employment is often insufficient and irregular, while migration to urban or semi-urban areas exposes families to precarious working conditions and social dislocation. Educational exclusion among tribal children is closely linked to household economic insecurity rather than school-related factors alone (Govinda & Bandyopadhyay, 2010; Nambissan, 2014).

Several studies have established a strong association between parental employment instability and child labour leading to school dropout (Basu & Tzannatos, 2003; Edmonds, 2008). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate a strong correlation between parental employment insecurity and school dropout among tribal children. When household income declines or becomes uncertain, children are withdrawn from school to contribute to family income or domestic labour. In such circumstances, education is perceived not as a right but as a luxury.

## 4. Migration, Child Labour, and Educational Disruption

Seasonal and distress migration is a common livelihood strategy among tribal households. Parents migrate in search of work in construction, brick kilns, plantations, and other informal sectors (Srivastava, 2011). Children often accompany migrating parents, resulting in frequent disruptions to schooling.

Migration creates multiple barriers to educational continuity. Enrolment in new schools is hindered by administrative constraints, language differences, and lack of documentation. Even when migrant children are enrolled, social exclusion and adjustment difficulties impede learning outcomes. Consequently, many children drop out permanently.

Child labour is both a cause and consequence of educational exclusion. When parental employment is unstable or insufficient, children are drawn into agricultural labour, forest product collection, domestic work, or informal urban employment. Numerous studies confirm that child labour and school dropouts are mutually reinforcing phenomena, rooted in household economic distress. Seasonal migration significantly disrupts schooling continuity among tribal children (Smita, 2008; Keshri & Bhagat, 2012).

## 5. Review of Policy Interventions in India

### 5.1 National Child Labour Project

The National Child Labour Project (NCLP), launched in 1988, aimed to rehabilitate working children through special training centres, stipends, and mainstreaming into formal schools (Government of India, 1988). While the scheme recognized the need for rehabilitation, its primary focus remained child-centric.

Although the NCLP included provisions for skill development of parents, these components were often weakly implemented. As a result, many rehabilitated children relapsed into labour due to persistent household poverty (ILO, 2017). This highlights the limitations of interventions that fail to secure long-term livelihood stability for families.

### 5.2 Samagra Shiksha Scheme

Samagra Shiksha Scheme represents an integrated approach to school education, encompassing access, equity, and quality (Government of India, 2020). The scheme includes residential schools, hostels, scholarships, and language support for tribal children. These measures have improved enrolment and retention in some regions.

However, Samagra Shiksha scheme largely operates within the education sector, with limited integration with employment and livelihood programmes. As a result, structural economic constraints faced by tribal households remain insufficiently addressed.

### 5.3 Rural Employment and Livelihood Schemes

Employment programmes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have potential to enhance income security in tribal areas. Evidence suggests that regular employment under MGNREGA can reduce distress migration and child labour, thereby supporting educational continuity. However, implementation gaps, delayed payments, and limited workdays undermine its effectiveness.

## 6. International Perspectives: Lessons from Italy

International experiences offer valuable insights into addressing child labour and educational exclusion through family-centred approaches (ILO, 2019; DCI-Italy, 2021).. Italy presents a particularly instructive model. The country enforces strict legal prohibitions on child labour for children below fifteen years of age (ILO, 2019). More importantly, it complements legal enforcement with robust social protection and employment support for families.

Italian policies conceptualize child labour and educational discontinuity as outcomes of family-level economic vulnerability. Consequently, interventions focus on ensuring parental employment, income support, and social services. Government agencies, civil society organizations, and international bodies collaborate through integrated monitoring systems to track at-risk families.

This family-centred and preventive approach has contributed significantly to reducing child labour and ensuring school retention. The Italian experience underscores the importance of addressing household economic conditions as a prerequisite for sustainable educational outcomes.

## 7. Towards a Family-Centred Policy Framework in India

The review of literature and policy experiences points to the need for a paradigm shift in India's approach to tribal education. Rather than treating education, employment, and social protection as separate policy domains, an integrated framework is required.

Child-centric rehabilitation programmes have limited long-term impact unless supported by family livelihood security (ILO, 2017; Government of India, 2020).

A family-centred approach would involve:

- Linking educational interventions with employment generation for parents.

- Prioritizing stable, local, and dignified employment in tribal regions.
- Strengthening convergence between education departments and agencies responsible for rural development, labour, and forest livelihoods.
- Promoting value addition to forest-based products and supporting tribal entrepreneurship.
- Expanding skill development programmes tailored to local economic contexts.

Such an approach recognizes education as a long-term investment that households can sustain only when basic economic security is assured.

### Linking Parental Employment and Education

This framework underscores that educational continuity is contingent upon economic security at the household level.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking Parental Employment and Educational Continuity



Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that illustrates the sequential and causal relationship between parental employment security and the educational continuity of tribal children, culminating in inclusive growth and social mobility. The framework is grounded in human capital theory, livelihood security perspectives, and social inclusion discourse.

The framework begins with **parental employment security**, which refers to stable, regular, and dignified livelihood opportunities for parents within or near their local contexts. Secure employment reduces income volatility and vulnerability to economic shocks, which are particularly pronounced in tribal and forest-dependent regions. Empirical studies indicate that employment stability among parents directly influences household decision-making related to children's education by easing immediate survival pressures.

Employment security leads to **household income stability**, the second component of the framework. Stable income enables families to meet basic consumption needs such as food, health care, and housing, while also reducing dependence on distress coping strategies. Income stability increases a household's capacity to bear both direct and indirect costs of schooling, including uniforms, transportation, learning materials, and opportunity costs associated with children's time.

The third stage highlights **reduced child labour and migration** as a critical intermediary outcome. In contexts of economic insecurity, children are often compelled to engage in income-generating activities or migrate with parents in search of work. Household income stability diminishes the economic necessity for child labour and reduces seasonal or distress-driven migration. As a result, children are less likely to experience disruptions in schooling caused by mobility, hazardous work, or domestic labour responsibilities.

This reduction in child labour and migration directly contributes to **improved school attendance and retention**, the fourth element of the framework. When children are consistently present in one location and free from labour obligations, they are more likely to attend school regularly and progress through successive grades without interruption. Improved attendance enhances continuity in learning, teacher-student interaction, and social integration within the school environment.

Sustained attendance and student retention lead to improved educational outcomes, including improved learning achievements, higher completion rates, and greater aspirations for secondary and higher education. Education under stable conditions fosters cognitive development, skill acquisition, and social capabilities, thereby strengthening human capital formation among tribal children.

The final outcome of the framework is **inclusive growth and social mobility**. Enhanced educational outcomes expand future employment opportunities for tribal youth, enabling intergenerational mobility and reducing structural inequalities. At the macro level, this contributes to inclusive economic growth by integrating historically marginalised populations into productive and skilled segments of the economy. Thus, the framework positions education not merely as a welfare intervention but as a transformative instrument for social justice and long-term development.

Overall, figure 1 underscores that educational continuity among tribal children cannot be sustained through school-based interventions alone. Instead, it highlights the centrality of parental employment security as the foundational condition that enables household stability, prevents child labour, supports schooling, and ultimately advances inclusive development. This integrated perspective reinforces the need for family-centred and cross-sectoral policy approaches that align education policy with employment generation and social protection mechanisms.

### 8. Policy Integration: Education–Employment Connection

Policy integration between education and employment recognises that children’s schooling outcomes are closely linked to household livelihood security. Aligning educational interventions with parental employment, income stability, and social protection reduces child labour and migration, strengthens school retention, and ensures that education contributes effectively to long-term inclusive growth and social mobility.

**Table 1: Child-Centric vs Family-Centric Policy Approaches**

Dimension	Child-Centric Approach	Family-Centric Approach
Policy focus	School access, incentives	Household livelihood security
Target group	Child	Child and parents
Treatment of child labour	Rehabilitation	Prevention
Sustainability	Short-term	Long-term
Educational outcome	Fragile retention	Stable continuity

Table 1 contrasts **child-centric** and **family-centric** policy approaches to addressing educational discontinuity and child labour. The child-centric approach primarily focuses on improving school access through incentives such as scholarships, midday meals, hostels, and remedial education. While these interventions can enhance enrolment, they often overlook the household’s underlying economic constraints. As a result, child labour is addressed mainly through rehabilitation after withdrawal from work, making educational retention fragile and susceptible to relapse when economic stress persists.

In contrast, the family-centric approach situates children’s education within the broader context of **household livelihood security**. By targeting both children and their parents, this approach emphasises employment generation, income stability, and social protection as preventive mechanisms against child labour. Secure parental employment reduces economic compulsion, thereby enabling children to remain in school consistently. Consequently, educational outcomes under a family-centric framework are more sustainable, as schooling is supported by stable household conditions rather than short-term incentives.

Overall, the comparison underscores that integrating education policy with employment and livelihood strategies is essential for achieving **long-term educational continuity and inclusive development**, particularly among socio-economically marginalised communities.

## 9. Implications for Inclusive Growth and Social Justice

Ensuring educational continuity for tribal children has implications far beyond individual outcomes. Education enhances human capital, facilitates social mobility, and contributes to inclusive economic growth. Conversely, persistent dropout and child labour perpetuate intergenerational poverty and exclusion.

Parental employment security emerges as a critical lever for breaking this cycle. When parents have stable livelihoods, children are more likely to remain in school, perform better academically, and aspire to higher education. This, in turn, strengthens democratic participation, reduces inequality, and advances social justice.

## 9. Conclusion

This review study has argued that the education of tribal children in India cannot be effectively sustained without addressing the employment conditions of their parents. School dropout among tribal children is not merely an educational issue but a manifestation of deeper socio-economic vulnerabilities rooted in employment insecurity, migration, and poverty.

While India has made commendable efforts through educational schemes and child-centred interventions, their impact remains constrained by inadequate attention to household livelihoods. International experiences, particularly Italy's family-centred approach, demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating education policy with employment and social protection.

For India to realize the constitutional promise of equality and inclusive development, policies must move beyond fragmented interventions towards a holistic framework that places parental employment at the centre of educational sustainability. Only by linking education with economic empowerment can the right to education for tribal children be realized in its true sense, transforming inclusion from a policy objective into a lived reality.

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