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Assessing the effectiveness of beneficiary schemes in enhancing higher education among the scheduled castes: A case study of Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal

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Abstract

Despite decades of consistent effort by the government to enhance the quality of higher education among the under-privileged and marginalized communities such as the scheduled castes (SC), the desired level of improvement continues to elude them. This has naturally raised doubts about the efficacy of the schemes and programmes launched for the purpose. The present study examines the effectiveness of the beneficiary schemes in enhancing the quality of higher education among the scheduled castes of Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal. Based on data collected through household surveys, the results of the research showed a significant reliance on reservation policy among the scheduled castes to enter institutions of higher learning, underscoring the importance of such policies for the benefit of the under-privileged. Scheduled caste groups such as Turi and Bhuiya are predominantly relying on reservation for undergraduate admission, emphasizing the practicality of this scheme for these castes. Additionally, financial assistance through scholarship is also playing a crucial role in turning the dream of higher education of many economically backward students from the scheduled castes into reality in the area.

Keywords: *Scheduled castes, higher education, beneficiary schemes, effectiveness*

Introduction

The Indian education system aims to ensure equitable access to education for all of its citizens. Nonetheless, individuals belonging to the deprived communities such as those classified as scheduled castes (SCs) have historically been denied access to educational institutions, resulting in a notably lower educational attainment level compared to others (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008; Thorat, 2006). Hence, the country has committed itself through its constitution to improve the higher education among the SCs by launching various beneficiary schemes, including reservation of seats in higher educational institutions, relaxation of admission criteria, scholarship programmes, hostel facilities, and many other welfare schemes. Despite seven decades of consistent efforts of the government, the SCs continue to occupy the lowest tier of the higher education spectrum in India (Wankhede, 2016).

Several studies have demonstrated that the privilege of access to higher education among the scheduled castes is not uniform and it varies considerably owing to the diverse social and economic backgrounds and

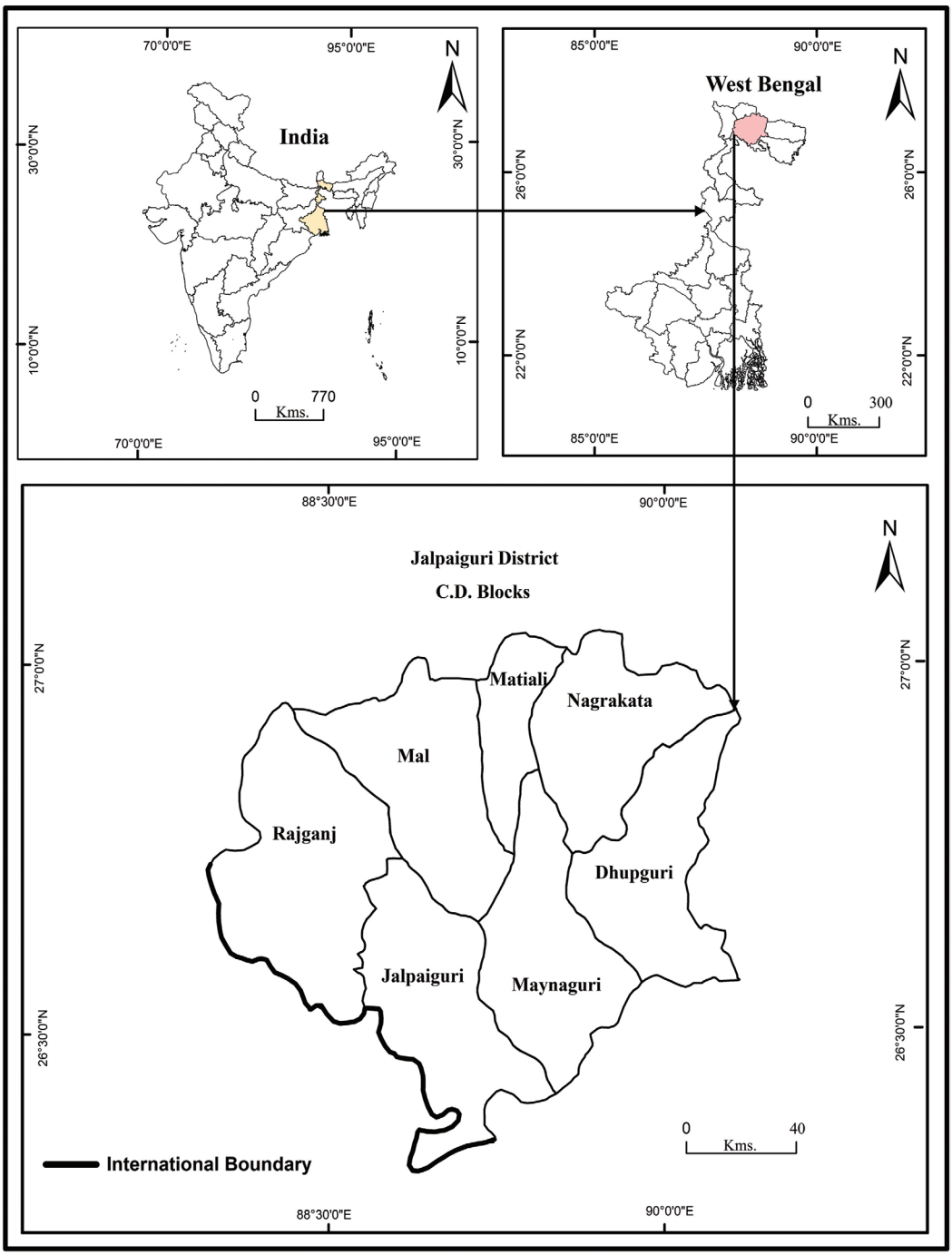

Fig. 1: Location of Jalpaiguri district

Table 1: Jalpaiguri district: sample size in the selected castes

Class Group (Based on Graduation and Above level of Education)	Scheduled Castes				Samples
	Castes	Total Population	% Share to Districts' Total SC Population	Persons having attained graduation and above education	
Poorly represented (0.01 - 1 %)	Lohar	21761	1.49	87	09
	Turi	2924	0.20	09	01
Lowly represented (1.01 - 2 %)	Hari	7458	0.51	55	06
	Bhuiya	2428	0.17	19	02
Moderately represented (2.01 - 3 %)	Rajbanshi	922603	63.27	13892	347
	Namasudra	341261	23.40	6858	141
Moderately highly represented (3.01 - 4 %)	Dhoba	13137	0.90	352	35
	Dosadh	3856	0.26	82	08
Highly Represented (Above 4 %)	Sunri	1456	0.10	156	16
	Pasi	738	0.05	29	03

Source: Census of India, 2011

levels of mobility among its members (Sarkar and Kasemi, 2019). Only a few of the caste groups within the SC category have been able to take full advantage of the government-sponsored facilities which has certainly proved beneficial to them in accessing higher education (Wankhede, 2016). For example, Majhi and Sardar (2019) found that castes like Sunri, Dhoba, Namasudra and Poundra in the state of West Bengal could better utilize such facilities to their advantage. Conversely, castes like Bagdi, Dom, Bauri, Mal and Ghasi have been largely excluded from utilizing these opportunities, leading to their underrepresentation in higher education in West Bengal. These facts are often cited as examples of failure of these programmes in achieving the objectives of improving access to higher education among the scheduled castes and provision of equal opportunities to those who are deprived. Critics therefore question the practicality and further continuation of the beneficiary schemes in improving higher education among the scheduled castes (Sarkar and Kasemi, 2020). Others however emphasise the need to strengthen the beneficiary schemes by making it more accessible to all (Radhakrishnan *et al.*, 2018). It is imperative in this context to evaluate the efficacy of these programmes specifying the relevance of beneficiary schemes for the SCs in higher education.

This study evaluates the effectiveness of the beneficiary schemes for the scheduled castes aimed at enhancing their accessibility to higher education among them in the Jalpaiguri District of West Bengal, an area that is home to a significant proportion

(46.46%) of scheduled caste population. It is noteworthy that among the various beneficiary schemes extended to the scheduled castes, seat reservation (15%) in higher education institutions and financial aid through scholarships for SC students emerge as the most impactful initiatives. The objective of this research therefore is to assess the effectiveness of these two schemes in facilitating entry and completion of undergraduate and postgraduate education among the scheduled castes of Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal.

Study area

Jalpaiguri district is the study area for the present research, which is situated in the northern part of the state of West Bengal, India. The district is renowned for its picturesque landscapes, diverse ethnicities, and vibrant culture. Nestled at the foot of the majestic Himalayas, the district spans from latitude 26º 15' 47" N to 26º 59' 34" N and longitude 88º 23' 2" E. to 89º 7' 30" E., occupying an area of 3386.18 km^2. It shares its borders with Bhutan to the north and Bangladesh to the south. The district comprises seven community development blocks (Fig. 1), one municipal corporation, three municipalities, 80 Gram Panchayat, 418 Mauzas, 404 inhabited villages, and 29 forest village. The district has a population of 2.38 million in the 2011 census (excluding the population of lately bifurcated Alipurduar district from Jalpaiguri district). Of this population, 1.10 million belong to the SC category, accounting for 46.46% of the district's total population.

Database and methodology

The data related to the study were collected from secondary as well as primary sources. The primary data has been generated through a comprehensive field survey carried out during December 2020-September 2021. No census has been held in India after 2011 rendering relevant data appear obsolete if not irrelevant. Special tables of the Census of India, 2011 focusing on the individual scheduled caste population for Jalpaiguri district were consulted to gather information on the total population, literates, graduates and post-graduates from scheduled castes in the area. Additionally, the District Census Handbook (2011) and statistical abstract for Jalpaiguri district, 2011, were referred to analyse the population and demographic characteristics of the area. Although the 2011 census data is quite outdated, it was used only for sampling purposes. All necessary, detailed, and up-to-date information was subsequently collected through a comprehensive household survey involving 568 households and the observation techniques.

Jalpaiguri district has 59 scheduled castes as per the 2011 census. Needless to mention, reaching out to the members of all these 59 caste groups is difficult making sample selection imperative. Therefore, a few of these caste groups were carefully selected to represent the current pattern of higher education among the SCs in the area. The participation level of higher education was categorised into five broad groups such as poor, low, moderate, moderately high and high based on the percentage of people having attained graduation and above level of education in 2011 census. Two castes from each of these five groups were selected as a sample representation, totalling ten sample castes in order to collect primary information to serve the focus of the study. The researcher considered 2.5% of the population who

Table 2: Respondents obtained admission in open or reserved quota at the undergraduate level (excluding B.Ed. programme)

Scheduled Castes	Reserved quota		Open quota		Total	
	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%
Lohar	05	71.42	02	28.57	07	100.00
Turi	01	100.00	00	0.00	01	100.00
Hari	03	75.00	01	25.00	04	100.00
Bhuiya	02	100.00	00	0.00	02	100.00
Rajbanshi	110	59.45	75	40.54	185	100.00
Namasudra	42	58.33	30	41.66	72	100.00
Dhoba	12	54.55	10	45.45	22	100.00
Dosadh	04	66.66	02	33.33	06	100.00
Sunri	04	44.44	05	55.55	09	100.00
Pasi	01	50.00	01	50.00	02	100.00
Total	184	59.35	126	40.64	310	100.00

Source: Field survey, 2020-21

Note: As the majority of the students opt for the B.Ed. programme in private colleges where, unlike the publicly funded institutions, it is not mandatory to strictly adhere to the reservation policy, the B.Ed. programme is excluded from these calculations to ensure comparable results.

had attained graduation and above from the numerically dominant Rajbanshi and Namasudra castes, and 10.00% from the remaining eight numerically small castes in the area while determining the number of respondents (samples) from each selected caste (Table 1).

Given the unavailability of secondary data on SC individuals attaining higher education at village or block level it was quite impossible to map the distribution of the target population through existing official records. Due to highly scattered distribution of the eight numerically small scheduled castes in the district, snowball sampling technique was employed as a suitable method to identify and reach potential respondents from across the district, ensuring representation from all targeted caste group.

To initiate the process, consultations were first held with officials from the SC/ST cells of Block Development Offices in Jalpaiguri district. With the consent of the competent government officials, the application forms for scheduled caste certificates from various concerned castes were reviewed in hardcopy. Basic applicant information was recorded, and they were approached to gather details of their higher education qualifications or if any of their familiars' had attained graduation and above level of education within their own caste. Although this method of snowball sampling might introduce selection bias due to its reliance on social networks, yet the issue was tried to be addressed by identifying three potential samples for each required slot across the ten selected scheduled castes. Subsequently, by applying a systematic random sampling technique the

Table 3: Respondents obtained admission in open or reserved quotas at the post-graduation

Scheduled Castes	Reserved quota		Open quota		Total	
	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%
Lohar	01	100.00	00	00.00	01	100.00
Turi	00	00.00	00	00.00	00	00.00
Hari	01	100.00	00	00.00	01	100.00
Bhuiya	00	00.00	00	0.00	00	00.00
Rajbanshi	47	87.04	07	12.96	54	100.00
Namasudra	26	83.87	05	16.13	31	100.00
Dhoba	05	83.33	01	16.67	06	100.00
Dosadh	01	100.00	00	00.00	01	100.00
Sunri	04	66.66	02	33.34	06	100.00
Pasi	01	100.00	00	00.00	01	100.00
Total	86	85.14	15	14.85	101	100.00

Source: Field survey, 2020-21

final 568 respondents for the present study were identified. This two-stage approach ensured sample diversity, minimized bias, and improved the representativeness of the sample, thereby enabling a cautious yet credible generalization of the findings.

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the reservation policy in two ways: (i) its impact on facilitating admission to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for students from the scheduled caste category, and (ii) its efficacy in enabling students benefiting from beneficiary schemes to secure admission to colleges/institutions of their choice at the undergraduate level of education. While assessing the efficiency of the reservation scheme in facilitating admission for SC students into colleges/ institutions of their choice, two key parameters have been considered to ascertain whether a respondent had the opportunity to pursue graduation in their desired college or institution. These parameters encompass: (a) the reputation of colleges or institutions in academic or infrastructure that respondents aimed to gain admission to, and (b) the proximity of the college or institution to the respondent's home, with those within a twenty-kilometre radius being considered choices. If the respondent's institution met either of these criteria, it was deemed that the respondent had the opportunity to pursue graduation in their desired college or institution, and vice versa.

The effectiveness of the scholarship scheme has been assessed by the percentage of respondents who would not have been able to complete their graduation and post-graduation without scholarship support in the area.

Results and discussion

Effectiveness of reservation in admission to undergraduate courses

Table 2 shows admission quotas of the respondents at the undergraduate level of

education. The findings reveal that 59.35% of the respondents gained admission due to the favorable effects of seat reservation policy for the SC category, underscoring the necessity of the reservation policy for SCs in the study area to pursue higher education. This result aligns with the observations of Bagde *et al.* (2016), who in a large-scale study conducted at the national level found that 26% of the males and 35% of the females would not have been able to secure admission in higher education without reservation. Similarly, Weisskopf, (2004) affirms that reservation policies have been instrumental in improving enrollment rates in higher education among the SCs nationwide. Therefore, looking at such high reliance on reservation scheme for securing an admission in higher education in Jalpaiguri district too corroborates the findings of other scholars that reservation continues to function as key mechanism for ensuring educational inclusion and equity for the SCs.

An inter-caste comparison of the 10 sample SC communities of Jalpaiguri district revealed that all the members of two of these caste groups namely Turi and Bhuiya who got admission into higher education institutions secured it only because of reservation of seats for the SC category indicating their inability to compete in open seats. This further indicates that individuals from these two castes would likely have been deprived of access to higher education without the seat reservation policy. In the case of Hari (75%) and Lohar (71.42%) castes, approximately three out of every four individuals secured admission in quotas reserved for the SC category at the undergraduate level. This highlights the significant reliance of these castes on the reservation policy for enrollment in higher education.

In contrast, individuals securing admission of reserved quotas was close to the district average, i.e., 59.35% in caste groups such as Dosadh (66.66%), Rajbanshi (59.45%), Namasudra (58.33%), and Dhoba (54.55%). Conversely, respondents from the Sunri (44.44%) and Pasi (50%) castes exhibited relatively lower dependency on the reservation policy to secure admission into undergraduate programs, indicating better academic performance within these castes.

Effectiveness of reservation in securing admission at post-graduate level

Table 3 illustrates that 85.14% of respondents gained admission to post-graduation due to the positive impact of seat reservation policies for the SC category. This underscores the significant necessity for reservation policies among scheduled caste individuals to access higher education. Among the different castes under study, respondents from Lohar, Hari, Dosadh, and Pasi castes secured admission only through reserved quotas, indicating their complete dependence on securing access to the post graduate programme through the reservation route. Similarly, Rajbanshi (87.04%), Dhoba (83.33%), and Namasudra (83.87%) castes too witnessed over 80% of their post-graduates obtaining admission through reserved quotas for the SC category, emphasizing their reliance on reservation policies to pursue post-graduate level of education in the area. In contrast, individuals from Sunri castes exhibit relatively lower dependency on reservation for post-graduation enrollment, likely due to their better academic performance at the graduation level, enabling a significant number from this caste to secure admission through open quotas.

Table 4: Respondents with reservation pursued graduation in desired colleges/institutions

Scheduled Castes	Yes		No		No desired college (s)		Total	
	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%
Lohar	03	60.00	01	20.00	01	20.00	05	100.00
Turi	01	100.00	00	00.00	00	00.00	01	100.00
Hari	02	66.67	00	00.00	01	33.33	03	100.00
Bhuiya	01	50.00	00	0.00	01	50.00	02	100.00
Rajbanshi	63	57.27	36	32.72	11	10.00	110	100.00
Namasudra	25	59.52	12	28.57	05	11.90	42	100.00
Dhoba	07	58.34	05	41.66	00	0.00	12	100.00
Dosadh	02	50.00	01	25.00	01	25.00	04	100.00
Sunri	03	75.00	01	25.00	00	0.00	04	100.00
Pasi	00	0.00	00	00.00	01	100.00	01	100.00
Total	107	58.15	56	30.43	21	11.41	184	100.00

Source: Field survey, 2020-21

Table 5: Opinion on chances to complete graduation in absence of scholarship

Scheduled Castes	Yes		No		Do not know		Total	
	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%
Lohar	00	00.00	07	87.50	01	12.50	08	100.00
Turi	00	00.00	01	100.00	00	00.00	01	100.00
Hari	00	00.00	04	80.00	01	20.00	05	100.00
Bhuiya	00	00.00	02	100.00	00	00.00	02	100.00
Rajbanshi	89	30.38	169	57.68	35	11.94	293	100.00
Namasudra	40	36.36	58	52.72	12	10.90	110	100.00
Dhoba	09	31.03	16	55.17	04	13.79	29	100.00
Dosadh	03	42.86	03	42.86	01	14.28	07	100.00
Sunri	05	50.00	03	30.00	02	20.00	10	100.00
Pasi	01	50.00	00	00.00	01	50.00	02	100.00
Total	147	31.47	263	56.32	57	12.21	467	100.00

Source: Field survey, 2020-21

Securing admission in the colleges/ institution of choice

The results show that out of 184 respondents who were favoured with reservation, 107 (58.15%) were able to secure admission to colleges or institutions of their choice, suggesting useful role played by the reservation policy in bringing SC students an admission in their desired college or institution (Table 4). This result partially aligns with the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2020-21, which highlights that SC students are increasingly accessing premier institutions like IIMs and IITs due to the favourable effects of reservations, affirming

Table 6: Opinion regarding chances to complete post-graduation in absence of scholarship

Scheduled Castes	Yes		No		Do not know		Total	
	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%	Respondents	%
Lohar	00	00.00	01	100.00	00	00.00	01	100.00
Turi	00	00.00	00	00.00	00	00.00	00	00.00
Hari	00	00.00	01	100.00	00	00.00	01	100.00
Bhuiya	00	00.00	00	00.00	00	00.00	00	00.00
Rajbanshi	21	38.89	28	51.85	05	09.26	54	100.00
Namasudra	12	38.71	17	54.84	02	06.45	31	100.00
Dhoba	02	33.33	03	50.00	01	16.66	06	100.00
Dosadh	00	00.00	00	00.00	01	100.00	01	100.00
Sunri	03	50.00	02	33.33	01	16.67	06	100.00
Pasi	01	100.00	00	00.00	00	00.00	01	100.00
Total	39	38.61	52	51.49	10	9.90	101	100.00

Source: Field survey, 2020-21

the critical role of affirmative action in facilitating the enrollment of the SC students at reputed institution (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2021).

While inter-caste analysis reveals that the reservation policy is particularly beneficial for individuals belonging to the Turi caste who achieved the highest percentage of admission in their desired college despite the fact that all those who got admission into institutions of higher learning only because of reservation and being unable to compete for unreserved seats. This trend however is attributed to their preference for the less competitive B. A. programme in the area, facilitating easier access to their preferred institutions. Next to the Turi caste, the Sunri caste recorded 75.00% of its members pursuing graduation in their desired colleges or institutions, largely due to their good academic performances. Relatively high percentage of students secured admission in desired college include Hari (66.67%) and Lohar (60.00%) castes which could be attributed to their enrollment in less competitive programs. Conversely, more than half of the respondents from Namasudra (59.52%), Rajbanshi (57.27%), Dhoba (58.33%), Dosadh (50%), and Bhuiya (50%) castes pursued graduation in their desired colleges close to the district average of 58.15%.

Effectiveness of scholarship to complete graduation

Table 5 illustrates the likelihood of completing graduation in the absence of scholarships among the respondents. As many as 56.32% of the respondents said that they could not have completed their graduation without the support of scholarship, highlighting the significant impact of this measure for scheduled caste students in the area. These findings corroborate the observation of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (2020), which emphasize that scholarship such as post-matric and national fellowship scheme for the SCs is crucial in accessing and completing professional and privatized education. Similarly, Karna, and Swain

(2022) affirm that scholarship is playing a vital role in enhancing SC students' academic performance and completion of higher education in the country. They noted that without such affirmative measure, dropout rates among the SCs would have been significantly higher than the present rate of dropout.

Inter-caste analysis demonstrates the inability of all respondents from Turi and Bhuiya castes to complete graduation in absence of scholarship on account of their poor financial background and other associated social stigma/constraints, emphasizing the critical need for scholarships among individuals from these castes to pursue higher education. Similarly, respondents from Lohar (87.50%) and Hari (80%) castes report a high dependency on scholarships to complete graduation. This supports the findings of Thorat and Dubey (2012) who argued that financial assistance through scholarship is enabling a substantial enrollment and completion of higher education among the economically weaker SCs. Conversely, castes like Rajbanshi (57.68%), Dhoba (55.17%), and Namasudra (52.72%) have individuals reliant on scholarships close to the district average of 56.32%. In contrast, Sunris display a comparatively lower dependency (30%) on scholarships to complete graduation, indicating a degree of economic self-sufficiency in pursuing undergraduate education.

Effectiveness of scholarship to complete post-graduation among the respondents

A significant 51.49% of the respondents reported their inability to complete post-graduation without a financial assistance from the government (Table 6). This underscores the vital role of scholarship in accomplishing a higher level of education in the study area. Consistent with this, Bhoi and Lakra, (2022) reports that fellowship like National Fellowship for Scheduled Caste Students (NFSC) are essential for enabling SC students to pursue and complete higher research degrees in the country. Similarly, Karna, and Swain (2022) emphasized the necessity of financial assistance in post-graduate programme as it substantially reduces the risk of dropout rates among the SCs. Yet, a little higher possibility of 38.61% to complete post-graduation in the study area without scholarships, compared to 31.47% at the undergraduate level, indicates that SCs of Jalpaiguri district pursuing post-graduation may come from relatively affluent families or possess a strong commitment to education. Inter-caste comparison reveals that individuals from the Lohar and Hari castes rely entirely on scholarships for post-graduation, emphasizing the greater necessity for this support among these two castes. Meanwhile, respondents from Namasudra (54.84%), Rajbanshi (51.85%), and Dhoba (50.00%) castes reported moderate difficulty in completing post-graduation without scholarships. Conversely, Sunris (33.33%) exhibit lower dependence on scholarships, suggesting economic sufficiency among individuals from this caste pursuing higher education.

Conclusion

This study delved into assessing the efficacy of beneficiary schemes to facilitate the enrollment and completion of undergraduate and post-graduate education among scheduled castes in Jalpaiguri district. The findings clearly show profound impact of reservation policies, with 59.35% of respondents attributing their ability to pursue undergraduate education to seat reservations

for Scheduled Castes. This underscores the undeniable contribution of reservation policies to the educational advancement of scheduled castes at the undergraduate level in the area, particularly evident in the higher reliance observed among individuals from Turi and Bhuiya castes. However, the degree of sole dependence on reservation for accessing higher education varies greatly across the caste groups selected for the present study indicating the fact that the scheduled castes are far from homogenous when it comes to their responses to pursuing higher education.

Moreover, the study discerned a significant dependency, accounting for 85.14%, on seat reservation policies for entry into post-graduation programmes, emphasizing the crucial role of reservation in facilitating higher education among SCs. Castes such as Hari, Dosadh, Lohar, and Pasis primarily rely on reservation policies for pursuing post-graduation, reflecting the critical need for such measures to enable access to advanced education opportunities.

The analysis also highlighted the practicality of reservation policies in securing admissions to preferred colleges or institutions for graduation, with Lohar, Turi, and Hari castes exhibiting high admission rates, often attributed to their participation in less competitive programmes of study. Conversely, better academic performance of Sunris correlates with their high admission rates in desired colleges.

Furthermore, the study underscores the significance of scholarships in facilitating graduation, particularly among individuals from Turi and Bhuiya castes, who heavily rely on financial assistance due to economic and other related constraints. However, the lower dependence for scholarship observed among Pasis and Sunris for undergraduate education suggests varying degrees of economic stability within SC communities. Interestingly, slightly higher likelihood of post-graduation completion without scholarships indicates a degree of economic ability among SCs pursuing higher degrees, although disparities persist, particularly among individuals from Hari and Lohar castes, who continue to require entire financial assistance even at the post-graduate level.

In essence, the study highlights the complex interplay of factors influencing educational access and completion of graduation and post-graduation among the scheduled castes. It emphasizes the crucial role of reservation policies and scholarship in mitigating barriers and fostering academic advancement. Viewed through the lens of spatial justice, the study observed that marginalized castes such as Turi, Lohar, Bhuiya and Hari largely inhabit the peripheral tea gardens of Jalpaiguri district marked by poor connectivity, weak infrastructure and inadequate access to urban based higher educational institutions. This spatial disadvantage, combined with economic hardship like landlessness and wage labour dependency significantly restricts their educational mobility, underscoring the urgent need for geographically inclusive educational policies that ensures both geographic and socio-economic barriers.

Competing interest

The corresponding author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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