

Community Participation in Educational Governance: The Tribal Experience in the Kalahandi District of Odisha, India

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Abstract: The study investigates the process of educational governance in the selected tribal communities of the Kalahandi district in Odisha, India. It examines the nature and extent of community participation and experiences of stakeholders involved the governance process. It also explores their perceptions and challenges encountered during the functioning process of school governance. The study adopted a mixed-method approach involving interviews, focused group discussion and documentary analysis of school management records. Findings of the study reveal that, though the formations of SMCs have been ensured in all the schools but their functioning is not encouraging. The varying level of participation of SMCs is influenced by several factors like socio-cultural, awareness levels and the responsiveness of school authorities. The findings underscore the need for developing a culturally responsive and sensitive strategy that could enhance meaningful community participation towards achieving the broader goals of access, equity and quality improving the learning outcomes of children.

Keywords: School Management Committees, Access, Equity, Quality, Community Participation, Educational Governance

Introduction

In general, decentralisation has been the core of administrative governance in India. In the field of education, Kothari Commission 1964-66 for the first time suggested for the community participation process in school affairs. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendment act of 1992 further gave constitutional status to Panchyat Raj Institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies (ULBs) to form a recognised and formal structure of decentralisation. Subsequently with the implementation of the National Policy on Education-1986, Program of Action (POA) 1992 and the Right to Education Act-2009

the idea got momentum and focus shifted to strengthen the community members to achieve the broader goals of UEE. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020) emphasizes the crucial role of community participation in transforming the education system by acknowledging that education is not just the responsibility of schools rather a collective responsibility of efforts involving teachers, parents, local authorities and community at large. The idea was duly acknowledged by John Dewey in his book *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *The Public and its problems* (1927). In view of Dewey schools should be 'embryonic communities' where children learn to live cooperatively and engage meaningfully with others. He visualised community as an educational resource and advocated for their active participation for the sustainment of society. A study by Putnam, 2000 highlights the significance of community participation in fostering effective and equitable educational system. Likewise, Narayan & Pritchett, 1999 have supported the idea that engaging local communities in the governance of schools can lead to greater accountability, relevance of curriculum in the governance of schools resulting improved educational outcomes, particularly in marginalised contexts.

In this context, the present paper is an attempt to understand the nuances of community participation in the process of educational governance, particularly in the elementary education in the tribal pockets of Kalahandi district of Odisha. It aims to access the existing mechanism, perceptions and barriers in the process of educational governance.

Literature Review

The theoretical base of the present study lies in the theories of Democratic Participation (Pateman, 1970), the importance of local knowledge in development (Chamners, 1983) and the Social Capital (Coleman, 1988). There is a positive correlation between stakeholders' involvement and school effectiveness as established in the research works of Epstein et al., 2009. Similarly, the need for culturally sensitive and inclusive approach is required to ensure meaningful participation of the community is emphasized in the works of Freire, 1970. In the context of India, under the Right to Education Act (RTE, 2009) the establishment of School Management Committees (SMCs) is a step forward to ensure community representation in school governance. However, the effectiveness of these committees in tribal areas, often marked by low literacy levels, linguistic diversity, and distinct cultural norms, requires closer examination (Govinda & Srivastava, 2008). Existing literature suggests that barriers such as lack of awareness, power imbalances, and inadequate capacity building can hinder genuine community participation in these contexts (Minority and Social Justice Commission, 2018).

In the light of above studies, it can be summarised that, there exists positive correlation between school functioning and community participation process.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of community participation. The study focused on ten elementary schools located in predominantly tribal villages within one block of the Kalahanidi district of Odisha.

1. **Qualitative Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews: Conducted with 40 parents (both male and female) from different tribal communities, 10 head teachers, 10 teachers, and 8 community leaders. The interview guide explored their understanding of educational governance, their experiences with SMCs, perceived barriers and facilitators of participation and their views on the impact of community involvement on school functioning.
2. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Two numbers of FGDs were conducted separately with men (N=7) and women (N=8) members of the school management committees to elicit collective perspectives on community participation and educational challenges. As the majority of members were of Kutia Kandha tribe, help from a local interpreter was sought to facilitate the discussions.
3. **Document Analysis:** The SMC meeting register, (minutes, attendance) and resolutions from the past academic year were analysed to assess the frequency and nature of community involvement in the decision-making processes.
4. **Observations:** Informal observations were conducted at the schools and during community gatherings to understand the social context and interactions related to education.

Quantitative Data Collection

1. **Surveys:** Administered to 40 parents across the ten schools using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire gathered data on their level of awareness about SMCs, their participation in school activities, their satisfaction with school governance, and their perceptions of the impact of community involvement on student attendance and learning outcomes (using a Likert scale).
2. **Data Analysis:** Information collected through the interviews, FGDs and observations were analysed and structured in different patterns, themes and narratives with reference to the different aspects of functioning as a part of qualitative analysis.

Likewise in the quantitative part descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean) and inferential statistics (chi-square test) was used to explore associations between awareness level and participation. The mixed method approach was followed for triangulation of findings. Providing a comprehensive understanding of community participation and functioning process.

3. **Ethical Considerations:** Prior consent was sought from all the stakeholders before the process of data collection. At the same time as the cultural norms and practices have its own distinctive value and process; local interpreters were used to facilitate the communication process as and when required.

Findings and Discussion

The findings revealed a complex picture of community participation in the governance and functioning process of elementary schools in the studied tribal areas of Kalahandi district. It can be categorised in the following aspects.

- (I) Awareness and understanding of SMCs: The study revealed that almost all the schools have formed the SMCs as per the democratic process and statutory requirements outlined in the RCFCE rules. But when it comes to the functioning aspect the level of participation was low, attendance was irregular and often the discussions rarely affected critical input from the community members. The level of awareness about their roles and functions among parents, particularly those with lower levels of literacy, was limited. Quantitative data showed that only 45% of surveyed parents reported having a clear understanding of the SMC's responsibilities. Qualitative interviews corroborated this, with many parents viewing SMCs primarily as a government initiative with limited understanding of their own potential role in decision-making.
- (II) Nature and Extent of Participation: Analysis of SMC meeting records indicated irregular attendance of parent members in some schools. When present, their participation was often passive, with discussions dominated by school authorities and the SMC Chairperson. Further the attendance of female participant is comparatively higher than their male counterparts. It may be due to the reason that, they mostly stay in the home whereas the male member usually goes out of the village for their livelihood. There is also another link observed that as the Mid-day meal program is mostly looked by the SHG (self help groups) the attendance and linkage of female

participant is more frequent than male members. Qualitative data suggested that cultural norms of deference to authority and limited prior experience in formal decision-making processes contributed to extend of participation in the process of discussion. However, in schools where proactive efforts were made by head teachers to engage parents through regular communication and inclusive meeting agendas, participation levels were noticeably higher, although the numbers of such schools are very few.

Barriers to Effective Participation: Several barriers were identified

- (i) **Literacy and Language:** Low literacy levels and linguistic differences between the tribal languages and the medium of instruction often hindered parents' ability to understand school-related information and participate effectively in discussions.
- (ii) **Socio-economic Constraints:** Daily wage labour and other economic pressures limited the time and availability of many parents to attend school meetings and activities.
- (iii) **Poor means of Information and Communication:** It was noted that poor means of communication channels between schools and communities, and a lack of accessible information about school governance processes, were significant barriers to facilitate the meaningful participation of SMC members in the process of school governance. It is evident with the untimely decision of fixing the dates or days for SMC meetings.
- (iv) **Perceived Power Imbalances:** In general there is a feeling among the community members that their opinions were not valued or not taken seriously by the school authorities. This in turn affects their attitude and approach towards the presence and participation in the regular meetings of SMCs. It was also shared by few members that at times they feel inferior and unpowered to counter the proposals in the meetings.
- (v) **Cultural Factors:** Traditional hierarchical structures and norms of communication within some tribal communities sometimes inhibited open and active participation in formal settings like SMC meetings.
- (vi) **Perceived Impact of Community Participation:** Despite the challenges, stakeholders who reported higher levels of community involvement perceived a positive impact on school functioning. They noted improvements in school infrastructure (e.g., repairs, sanitation), increased parental involvement in school events, and better communication between teachers and parents. Quantitative data showed a

statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) positive correlation between parents' reported level of participation in school activities and their satisfaction with the school environment. However, the direct impact on student learning outcomes was less clearly perceived by the community, possibly due to other influencing factors such as teacher absenteeism and curriculum relevance.

The findings of the study reveal that in cent percent schools the formation of SMCs is done but their functions remain limited. This highlights the complex realities of implementing community participation in educational governance within tribal context. In the quantitative aspect 45% of surveyed parents had clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the SMC indicate a substantial gap between structural formations and substantiate participation. This supports the argument pointed out by Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2010) that the institutionalization of SMCs has often been procedural rather than transformative, with limited focus on empowering community members through the capacity-building and training.

Qualitative findings underscore the perception of SMC members and particularly the members with low literacy level. It was noted that, the concept of SMC has been viewed as a government-imposed mechanism rather a local decision-making body. This further increases their involvement and attachment in the process. In this regard, the 'participatory deficit' (Govinda, 2008) observed in SMCs mirrors the broader challenge of democratizing school governance in marginalized context. The nature of participation in SMC meetings was largely passive. The discussions to great extent dominated by head teachers or SMC chairperson. In respect to the parental involvement, it was more of symbolic rather than substantive. On the other hand, an interesting observation was observed as the presence of female members was invariably higher than their male counterpart. This could be the result of their engagement in the Mid-Day Meal program through the self-help groups (SHGs). As Jha and Parvati (2014) observed, such programmatic linkages often serve as an entry point for women's engagement in school affairs, even though their voices in governance remain underrepresented. This, highlights to the scope of exploring such networks to leverage, strengthen the participatory process and governance model.

The findings underscore several barriers that hinder the participation of SMC members in the governance process. The most potential among them is the linguistic barrier, socio-economic indifferences and differential attitudes among the members. It was noted that the means (language) used for discussion was not familiar to all. Hence, Odia or English terms in few cases have created disconnections among them. This is further substantiated with the socio-cultural factors and differential attitudes like daily

labour, seasonal migration and acceptance to the authority respectively often obstructs their presence and participation. Overall, it affects the decision-making process.

Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

The study demonstrated that community participation in educational governance within the tribal areas remain largely symbolic, constrained by barriers like lack of awareness, power imbalances and inadequate capacity building as the stumbling blocks. Although the institutional framework for SMCs exists across schools, genuine empowerment of tribal communities remains a challenging area. It resonates with the findings that growing policy emphasis on inclusive education and local language integration (Times of India, 2025), as well as with the participatory spirit envisioned in the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020).

Implications

All these findings have great implications at both policy and practice level. It may be summarized under three broad areas to improve the scenario. First, strengthening the capacity-building interventions for SMC members. Second, strengthening institutional support and monitoring mechanism to ensure effective governance at the school level. Third, designing of context-based program often from the lens of inclusiveness could help in translating the provisions into practice. Thus, addressing these challenges requires multidimensional strategies, including capacity-building, gender sensitization, policy enforcement and community mobilization. It is imperative to align with emerging trends in educational governance that prioritize accountability, equity and stakeholder engagement to strengthen the federal structure, decentralized governance and inclusive process as it facilitates the journey for achieving the broader goals envisioned in the National Education Policy-2020 and the Sustainable Development Goal-4.

Recommendations

In the light of above discussion and implications of the study the following recommendations are made.

- (i) Structured, multilingual training modules need to be developed that meets the contextual requirements and specifications.
- (ii) Use of native language should be encouraged to make the interaction meaningful and effective.
- (iii) The monitoring mechanism need be institutionalized that helps in strengthening the local people and promotes accountability.

To conclude, it may be said that there is a need for overhaul the process of educational governance mechanism making a shift from compliance to commitment, training to owning and educating to empowering. This will help in gearing the involvement of participants encouraging them as the co-creators in the educational process.

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