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<u>Socio-Economic Origins of School Dropouts in Rural India</u>

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Abstract

Education means enabling a student to gain knowledge and wisdom in order to lead a better life. Overall, 69% per cent of females and 85% of males age 6 and over have ever attended school. The rate of dropouts in rural areas is comparatively more than urban areas. Boys and girls in Indian schools leave school education incomplete giving rise to the sensitive issue of school dropouts. The present study (review study) identifies reasons forcing Indian students to drop out of school and presents different variables responsible for it. The study has emphasized connecting this paper with SDG-4 and provided some recommendations. The data has been extracted from the National Family Health and Survey (NFHS 4).

While the school dropout rate remains consistently high for boys, it is noteworthy and rather comforting to know that girls depict a low dropout rate. The present study identifies the reasons for dropouts such as lack of interest in studies, the domestic contribution of children for household chores, economic reasons and migration of families. The study paints a picture of helpless school-going children and the effort to minimize school dropout rates which are in the hands of all the responsible citizens in India.

Keywords: *school dropouts, school children, household, socio-economic, SDG-4*

1.0 Introduction

The development of society depends on quality education and it can only be measured by assessing the socio-economic indicators that extend educational inequality prevalent in society. Many factors contribute to the unequal distribution of education among urban and rural India. The government had ensured to reach the goal of achieving basic education for all by 2010 utilizing *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* and Right to Education initiatives. Access to education and school enrolment rates at all levels were subsequently increased, but the phenomenon of school dropouts still plagues the progress of education in India. It is of utmost concern that high dropout rates were reported in most states in India at all stages. Despite major efforts, school attendance rates drastically decline from 90% at the primary level to 78% at lower secondary and 58% at upper secondary levels (IIPS, 2016). Illiteracy, poverty, inadequate earnings and poor living conditions of parents force them to withdraw and also put them into various low paid jobs to contribute to the family income.

National Indian Government statistics indicate that the ratio of adolescent girls to boys enrolling in a secondary school in Maharashtra state is only 0.84, indicating a substantial female disadvantage. Also, severe regional and caste disparity exists. India spends 4.6 per cent of its total GDP on education and ranks 62nd in total public expenditure on education per student. The children 'at risk', like child labour, orphan, children of migrant workers, do not essentially have the access to education. (Gouda & Shekhar,2014)

Education is a fundamental human right. It is a key factor in the continued economic development of the country and its ability to enhance the quality of life for its citizens as well as compete within global world markets (Okumu, et al, 2008). The problem of dropout has always been persistent in all the developing countries. The National Education Policy (2020) aims to meet the inadequacies concerning quality education, innovation and research. One of the goals of the SSA has been to achieve equity of elementary education that indicates both discontinued children during the primary school-going age and the children who were forced to terminate their education before completion of primary school due to social and economic obligations. Accordingly, the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012-17) did focus on development, equal educational opportunities and cultivating quality education for all pockets of society. As compared to the greying population worldwide, India has an added advantage with its young population, with an average age of 29 years, the demographic dividend can be harnessed with an improvement in health, education and skill development. (Beena Pandey, 2018)

Several studies have been conducted on dropout issues based on different gender, region, in various parts of the world. This paper has tried to investigaDrseveral factors which can broadly be divided into 1) economic factors 2) household-level factors 3) caste and gender-based factors 3) cultural and regional factors. Further, this paper would attend to understand the current approaches which are adopted by India to contextualize Goal 4 on education by integrating them into the National Education Policy 2020.

According to UNESCO, approximately 0.32 billion students in India have been affected by school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO 2020). Of these, almost 84% reside in rural areas while 70% attend government schools. As of 2015, the average dropout rate across secondary schools in India was 17.06% with higher numbers for rural areas (NUEPA 2016).

Past evidence suggests that short term disruptions in schooling often lead to permanent dropouts among the poor (Reddy and Sinha 2010). One of the reasons being the unemployment of parents and the children being forced to contribute to the family income. In this inevitable economic crisis, education costs might be too costly, which will result in pushing the children in the labour market (Bharadwaj et al. 2019). All the unmarried girls of the family have to drop out of school so that they can take up extra additional household responsibilities as parents increase their own work hours to manage economic distress. Similarly, these economic shocks are likely to have a greater impact on children from communities that are marginalized based on their caste, tribe and religion, and already experience higher dropout rates (NUEPA 2016). Dropping out, in turn, may lead to increases in child marriages, domestic violence, early pregnancies and a plethora of other development issues (Birchall 2018). Without waiving the school fees, it is impossible to tackle the dropout rates as educational expenses become exorbitant for many. Although some state governments like Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Jharkhand tried to cut down the school tuition fees and other school expenses during the lockdown period.

2.0 Objective

- To examine the trend in education in primary and secondary levels in India and to understand the differentials which contribute to school dropouts at the national level.
- To understand household and parental factors which influence the discontinuation of education.
- To comprehend current approaches taken by India to contextualize SDG 4 in addition to the new Education Policy (2020).

3.0 Methodology

The purpose of the study is to examine how the different socio-economic factors determine and influence the rate of dropouts in India and compare the relationship between different socio-economic factors. Four stages of school education program are followed by India and pre-preliminary education is not included in the formal education structure.

Several initiatives like the Right to Education Act (2009) and the National Policy on Education (NPE) (1968) deliver inclusive basic education for all.

Education is the most multidimensional component for achieving all SDGs, especially **Goal 4 of the SDGs on Education affirms that: Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Learning Opportunities for all.** (Beena Pandey, 2018)

The present study is a mixture of both a case study and comparative analysis. It includes data available in similar studies and NFHS 4 data. These numbers provide indicators on the school dropout issue and the study tries to establish a relationship between the factors. The present study is qualitative secondary research. It is qualitative because the data is collected from various similar studies and NFHS 4 data.

4.0 Conceptualization

The study focuses on different socio-economic factors such as poverty, gender, lack of interest, a distance of the school from home, quality of teachers, transport facility, social environment and many other factors. Also, the study further reveals the factors like caste, household occupation and religion have a substantial effect on the dropout rates in rural India. It has been found that the odds of dropping out of school are highest for a student belonging to the ST category, followed by a student belonging to the SC category. The odds of dropping out of schools are also found to be highest among agricultural labours and in context to religion, it is highest for Buddhist student, followed by a Muslim student. (Mukesh, Srivastava 2015)

Despite many efforts from the government, investments and many innovative initiatives have failed to eliminate the fact that many states have alarmingly high dropout rates in India. It is not only the establishment of schooling services and quality of education but also other households and social factors that play a major role in the termination of education. It is integral to understand the family and parental features to observe the reasons behind school dropouts. National Family Health Survey-4 provides a prospect to examine the school dropout, based on a large nationally representative sample survey of households in the Indian context. (Gouda M & Dr Sekhar, 2014, p.76)

Though India has made progress in increasing enrolment at all levels, there are enough scopes to improve quality education. For positive learning outcomes, it is crucial to ensure that quality education, equity and inclusion in the education system represent key elements of the vision for SDG 4 and measuring progress to 2030. As there is no specific guideline to measure the quality, it is best to ensure the holistic development of a child in terms of knowledge, values, attitudes and skills. Various theoretical perspectives are also needed to consider the influences of the development like Amartya Sen's, Capability Approach calls for a focus on how social context constrains individual freedoms and is central to debates about social justice and education policy. (Warrington M, Kiragu S, 2012).

5.0 Literature Review

Elementary education besides being a basic human need is vital for raising the standards of life, providing gainful employment, removal of regional backwardness, thereby ensuring overall development and wellbeing of a country. It is therefore the need of the hour to review the literature carried out by different academicians, educational thinkers, researchers, policymakers, and educational reformers in the field of education in India.

Student's dropout is a serious issue for any developing country. Student's dropouts mean discontinuing schooling for financial and practical reasons and disappointment with their social system and examination results. School dropout or low completion rates have been a subject of interest to academics, researchers, and policymakers for a long time. According to the Poverty Status Report (PSR, 2005), the phenomenon of high school dropout rate continues to pose a big challenge to the successful implementation of national policies.

In Dipa Mukherjee's paper titled, 'Reducing out of school children in India', there has been an attempt to explore trends in school dropouts and reasons behind leaving schools. The author has identified the low-level income of families and earning opportunities for children as a major factor contributing to out of school children. Other reasons also indicate a lack of awareness on the part of parents. The paper also focuses on gender and regional differences and stresses that poverty eradication and inclusive economic growth must go hand in hand with education expansion programs (Delhi School of Economics,2013).

In another paper by Sunita Chugh titled "Dropout in Secondary Education: A Study of Children living in slums of Delhi", both family and social factors are highly correlated with each other and contribute to dropouts. Some of the major reasons identified are to look after younger siblings, disputes within the family, lack of time for studies at home, no need of education for employment, no need of education for girls, lack of interests in studies, poor comprehension, or academic performance, no effective teaching in school and medium of instruction.

A study on the dropout problem in West Bengal by Chandan Roy suggests pupil-teacher ratio, classroom teacher ratio, percentage of repeaters, gender-specific issues cause dropouts. Arun K Kishore's paper on "School Dropouts: Examining the space of reason" looks into the problem of school dropouts in Kerala. Though Kerala has an extremely high literacy rate, reasons for a mere 0.5% dropout include lack of interest in studies, poverty, poor quality of education and failure in education. Broad factors include physical health, financial status, mental retardation, school issues, family issues and employment (Delhi School of Economics).

The NSSO Survey, 52nd Round (NSSO,1998) cited the main reason for children dropping out of school as 'children not interested in studies' (24.4%), or unable to cope with or failure in studies' (22.5%). Other reasons given were financial constraints (12.4%), parents not interested in the education of their children (9.4%) and participation in other economic activities (7.8%) (NSSO, 1998). Thus, the PROBE Report, the NFHS survey and the NSSO surveys have indicated that a lack of interest in studies is one of the key reasons for school dropout, as indicated by parents (Delhi School of Economics, 2013).

Despite numerous efforts made by various governments bodies, various boards of education, existing policies of education and revival and efforts of NGOs, many young Indian boys and girls fail to complete their education. This generates an ever-increasing pressure on society to devise ways and means to send them back to school or independently complete their education. Despite efforts to incorporate all sections of the population into the Indian education system, through mechanisms such as positive discrimination and non-formal education, large numbers of young people are still without schooling (Sateesh and Sekhar, 2014).

India is a developing country with meagre income levels. In India, due to financial problems and expenses, the dropout rate is very high (Jingrong, 2004). Children of below poverty line households are vulnerable to stay back home to earn and support their families. Due to this child labour is prominent in India. Children are put at work which is sometimes risky. They are made to work in dangerous conditions such as in chemical factories and coal mines thereby, putting their health at high risk. Illiteracy, poverty, inadequate earnings and poor living conditions of parents force them not only to withdraw their wards from schools but also put them in various types of jobs to contribute to the family income (Rao, 2000).

The dropout rate is also influenced by ignorant and illiterate parents. Unlike educated parents, ignorant and illiterate parents don't constitute for their children's regularity at school. However, most of the illiterate parents aspire big for their children. A considerable amount of them is still responsible for school dropouts. This might be due to a lack of information about formal school education which they have never been subjected to. The involvement of parents in school academic affairs plays a magnificent role. The more a parent intervenes in his or her child's education, the less are the chances of child dropouts (Syed Rooquiyya Tabassum, 2019)

6.0 Analysis and Discussion

Data for this study has been obtained from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), conducted in 2015-16. NFHS-4 provides information on fertility, mortality, family planning and important aspects of nutrition, health, and health care. The specific question asked to families, the questions included what was the highest standard the household member completed, did attend school anytime during the year 2015-16, what was the standard attending, school attendance in the previous year etc. The school dropout is considered from grade 1 to grade 10 that is approximately 6-16 years of age which is going to be considered for this study.

Seventy-seven per cent of girls and 78 per cent of boys age 6-10 attend primary school. The net attendance ratio (NAR) drops in secondary school: only 66 per cent of girls and 69 per cent of boys age 11-17 attend secondary school. The gross attendance ratio (GAR) is 85 per cent at the primary school level and 80, per cent at the secondary school level.

These figures indicate that several children outside the official school-age population for that level are attending primary school, and not all those who should be are attending secondary school. (NFHS 4, 2015-16)
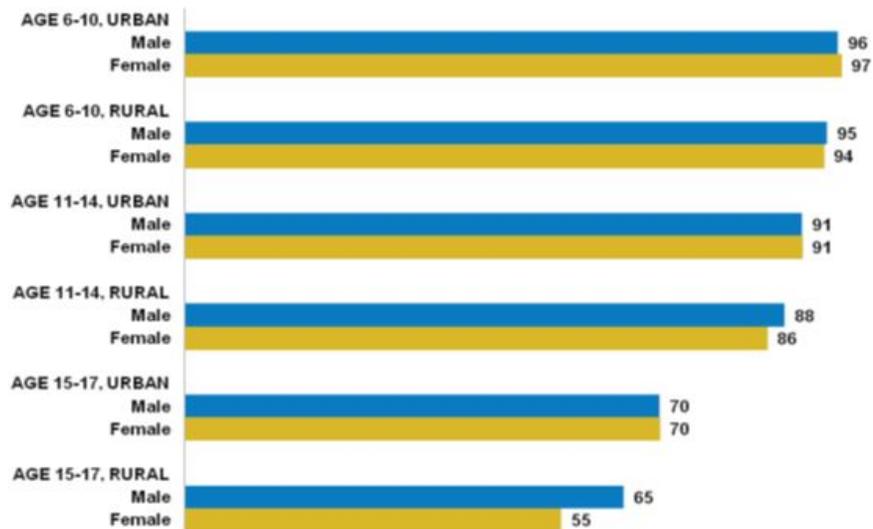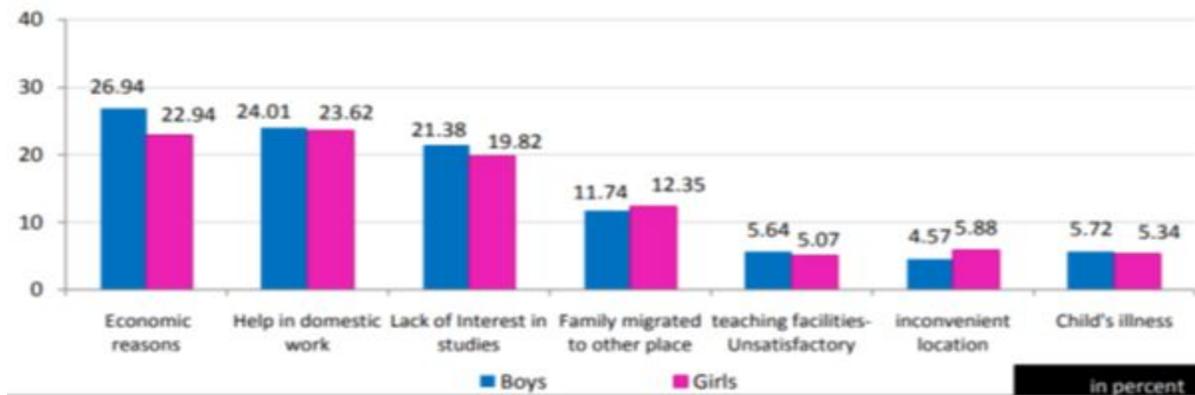

(NFHS 4, 2015-16)

Patterns by Background Characteristics (from NFHS 4 data):

- The NARs increase with household income.
- At the primary level, there isn't much difference in GAR between rural and urban. However, it increases substantially at the secondary level.
- There is not much difference between NAR and GAR at the primary level by castes/tribes, but it's effective at the secondary school level for the children belonging to the scheduled tribes.

NFSH-4 data provides that the most important reason for dropping out of school is not being interested (43.7 male, 24.8 female). The two other important factors mentioned by the households were "Required for household work" (12 per cent) and "Required for outside work for payment in cash or kind" (3 per cent). Other reasons reported for dropping out of school include "repeated failures"," required for work on farm/family business", "school too far away", and "further education was not considered as necessary". We should also note the fact that the important reason was stated by the household respondent or a family member, but not the child dropping out of school.

The reasons can be broadly divided into 4 categories which are- Reasons related to children (Not interested in studies, Repeated failure, Got married), Reasons related to Household (cost too much, required for household work, Further education not considered necessary, Required for work on farm/family business, Required for the care of a sibling, Required for outside work for payment in cash or kind), School related reasons (school too far, Did not get admission, Transport not available, Not safe to send girls, No proper school facilities for girls, No female teacher). (Gouda & Shekhar, 2014) From NFHS 4 data it can be gathered that reasons related to children have the highest number of dropouts. The numbers can drop by improving school infrastructure, quality education and by addressing socio-economic factors of a household.

The dropout among Muslims is higher in states like West Bengal, Gujrat. This survey also indicates that children living in rural areas are more likely to drop out than urban areas. It is observed that households having six or more children have more dropout rates and increase in landholding causes less dropouts. Earlier studies observed that it is crucial to have parental education to provide quality education to children. The dropouts were higher for illiterate parents, both the parents not working and also if the father is not involved in any economically productive activity.

(NFHS 4, 2015-16)

The figure (Syed Rooquiyya Tabassum,2019) shows the reasons behind primary school dropouts. Economic reasons are the main for boys and for girls it's help in domestic work.
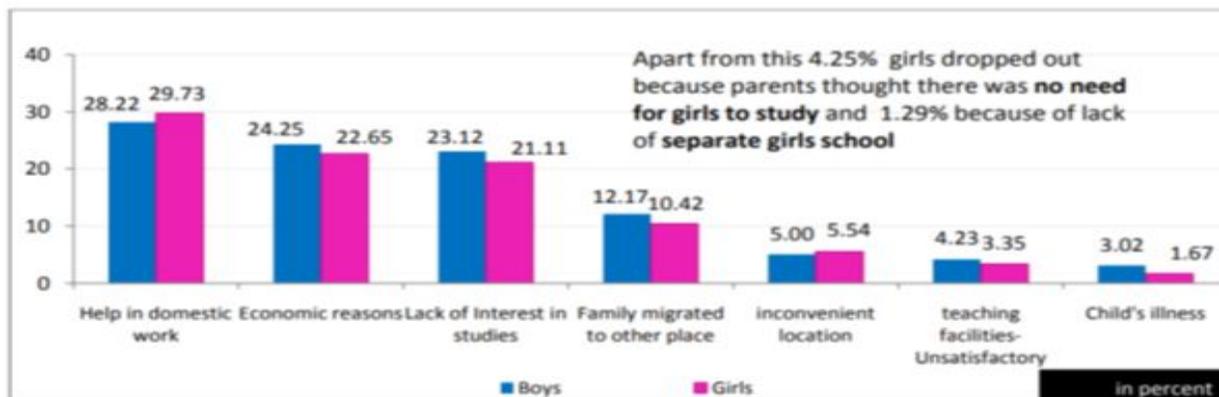
(NFHS 4, 2015-16)

In the upper primary stage, it can be observed that high dropout rates are there for help in domestic work irrespective of gender. Economic reasons and lack of interest in studies are the next main reasons. It should also be noted that children with illness also have a high number of dropouts. At last, it can be stated that the boy's dropout rates are higher because they have to contribute to the family economically after getting a basic education. Girls dropping out of school for various household and economic reasons. Overall, poverty and lack of interest might be the most concerning reasons behind the dropouts.

SDG-4 overview

By 2030, the goal of SDG-4 is that all boys and girls complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to the success of SDG-4.

By 2030, its goal is to ensure that all children get access to childhood development and pre-primary education to make them ready for primary education.

By 2030, it will try to ensure access to affordable vocational and tertiary education to all men and women equally.

By 2030, one of its major goals is to increase the employment for youth and adults who have relevant skills including education and vocational training skills.

Another major goal is to eliminate gender disparities in education and to ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.

Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing states.

For India to achieve all targets of Goal 4 of the SDGs within a 15-year time frame, QAEI offers a window of opportunity to be the prerequisites for quality and accessibility of education for India's young population to achieve at least a minimum proficiency level in reading and maths and at the same time be productive and skilled workforce for the resurgent India.

However, a series of programmes and policies initiated by India, focussing on quality and inclusiveness are already in place prior to the adoption of SDGs. In India, constitutionally several key programmes and policies have been initiated to provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a fundamental right. The Ministry of Human Resource Development works through two departments viz. Department of School Education and Literacy responsible for universalizing elementary education and the Department of Higher Education engaged in establishing world-class institutions of higher learning. (Beena Pandey, 2018)

7.0 Recommendations

The research study aims at primarily spreading awareness to eliminate school dropouts and if not eliminate them totally, at least minimize it. The following recommendations might serve as guidelines for society to ponder over.

- Government should devise ways and means to control the population and educate people about the consequences of population explosion. It cannot be denied that the government is already doing this in India however, the fact remains that much needs to be accomplished. Once the population is controlled quality education (SDG-4) can be imparted. They should be teaching about family planning and its importance. (Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research,2019).

- Child Labour which is banned by the Indian Government is still now practised in certain areas. It is recommended that the government should look deeper and check the implementation of their policies properly. They should conduct awareness campaigns in rural areas and expose the hazards of such situations to the parents.

- Government should launch more programs where they can provide free education to more children in the villages. The quality of mid-day meals should be developed to increase the attainment of children.

- Children in India fall sick mostly due to sanitation problems. The government should focus on improving the surroundings of the child as a strong mind cannot survive in a weak body'. There are hardly any toilets in rural areas, which leads to health problems and the government should implement more policies and look into the matter.

- Good infrastructure should be established in schools so as to draw students closer to education and spark interest in them.

- Due to lack of transportation parents cannot send their children to the schools which are located far from their home. Government should set up schools which are easily accessible to children.

- In education planning, Bangladesh has emphasized private-public intervention in terms of improving the quality of secondary education. An innovative model was introduced by BRAC for high school teachers and students to refer to the curriculum and textbook from interactive education material. In the context of India, there is an urgent need to start a yearlong pre-school education, ensuring attendance of teachers and other facilities like sanitation separate for boys and girls, water etc. To emphasize SDG 4 India needs to act swiftly considering India's long term development planning and demographic dividend.

- Standardization, harmonization and periodicity of data related to education would help to measure and quantify the SDG 4 effectively. (Beena Pandey,2018). The indicators need to be measured across all states and districts to ensure sustainable achievements.

This will also help identify the factors at which the states are lagging behind, so that policy forming and implementation can be directed to achieve the desired educational standard.

8.0 Conclusion

Dropouts at the school level in India are a serious matter of concern. While India is moving forward towards ensuring 'admission for all' with the Right to Education, concerns for the dropouts as serious as children belonging to the relevant age-cohort and not enrolling. Dropouts result in wastage of the education system thereby proving it to be inefficient. Closer to half of the population in India chose to discontinue its studies after the 10th standard, with the ST population having a dropout as high as 60+ percentages (Dr. Kinjal V Ahir, May 2015)

The study has also observed the household and parental characteristics which possibly influenced the dropout rates, it's high among the children belonging to the Muslim, scheduled caste, scheduled tribe families. With the increase of house holdings, there's a decline in dropouts. Also, paternal characteristics play a crucial role in determining quality education. It is significant to highlight that refining the school infrastructure, quality of education and better efficient investment in quality education can prevent the dropouts to a limited range. Unless and until there is considerable improvement in the economic status of households and change in the social attitudes of parents, achieving the goal of universalisation of school education will remain a major challenge for India. (IIPS, 2014, p.83)

This paper further can put an effort to paint a picture of a helpless school-going child who suffers from a fatal disease called DROPOUTISM. The study illustrates reasons for school dropouts and capsules recommendations to fight this social challenge.

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