International Journal of Applied Social Science **REVIEW PAPER**
(An International Double Blind Peer Reviewed / Refereed Research Journal of Social Science) ISSN : 2394-1405 (Print)
Volume 13 (9 & 10), September & October (2026) : 1094-1099 ***Website :*** www.scientificresearchjournal.com
Received : 16.08.2026; Revised : 02.09.2026; Accepted :16.09.2026 **DOI** : https://doi-ds.org/doilink/11.2026-61628763/IJASS/13.9&10/1094-1099

Tribal Students and Higher Education in Maharashtra: A Review of Socio-Economic and Educational Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Tribal students continue to face significant socio-economic and educational challenges in accessing and sustaining higher education in Maharashtra. Financial constraints, inadequate educational infrastructure, limited access to hostels and residential facilities, geographical isolation, and difficulties in accessing information about educational support schemes can affect their participation and continuity in higher education. The present study reviews the socio-economic and educational challenges experienced by tribal students in the context of higher education in Maharashtra and examines major governmental support measures available to them. The study is based on secondary data collected from government reports, official statistical databases, policy documents and relevant academic literature. No primary survey or field investigation was conducted for the present study. Data and information were examined descriptively to identify major patterns, institutional support mechanisms and continuing challenges. The review indicates that scholarships, fee reimbursement, hostel facilities, residential educational institutions and other welfare measures have an important role in supporting tribal students' access to education. However, financial vulnerability, inadequate access to educational resources, geographical barriers, accommodation-related difficulties and other socio-economic factors continue to influence higher educational participation. The study highlights the need for effective implementation of existing schemes, improved access to information, strengthened residential and academic support, and coordinated social work interventions to promote equitable and sustained participation of tribal students in higher education.

Keywords: Tribal Students, Higher Education, Socio-Economic Challenges, Educational Challenges, Maharashtra, Tribal Development, Social Work, Educational Support

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as an important means of social transformation, human development and economic mobility. Higher education has particular importance because it provides opportunities for professional development, employment, knowledge acquisition and participation in social and economic institutions. For historically disadvantaged communities, equitable access to higher education is also closely associated with social justice and inclusion.

Scheduled Tribes constitute an important section of India's socially and economically disadvantaged population. Tribal communities are diverse in terms of language, culture, livelihood, geographical location and socio-economic conditions. A considerable proportion of tribal settlements are located in rural, hilly and geographically dispersed areas. Distance from educational institutions, limited transport, economic constraints and differences in educational resources can influence participation in higher education.

The educational position of tribal students cannot therefore be assessed only through enrolment. Access, continuation and completion are influenced by household income, parental education, accommodation, transportation, digital connectivity, scholarships, academic preparedness, language and institutional support.

The All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE)

How to cite this Article: Ghongade, Dileep (2026). Tribal Students and Higher Education in Maharashtra: A Review of Socio-Economic and Educational Challenges. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.,* **13** (9 & 10) : 1094-1099.

2021-22 reported 27.1 lakh Scheduled Tribe students enrolled in higher education in India, representing 6.3 per cent of total higher education enrolment. The national Gross Enrolment Ratio for ST students was 21.2 in 2021-22 (Ministry of Education, 2024).

Maharashtra has developed a range of educational welfare measures for tribal students through the Tribal Development Department. These include post-matric scholarships, fee reimbursement, government hostels, residential education and other forms of financial assistance.

Review of Literature

Existing research and policy literature on tribal education indicates that educational participation is influenced by a combination of economic, social, geographical and institutional factors. Government reports similarly recognise that financial support, accommodation and access to educational institutions are important components of tribal educational development.

AISHE data indicate growth in ST participation in higher education at the national level. In 2021-22, ST enrolment reached 27.1 lakh and female ST enrolment reached 13.46 lakh. The increase in enrolment indicates progress in participation, but enrolment statistics alone do not capture retention, completion, academic experience or post-education outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2024).

The Tribal Development Department, Government of Maharashtra, provides post-matric scholarship and fee-related support to eligible ST students. The Department also operates government hostels for tribal students who need residential facilities while pursuing education away from their villages.

The Economic Survey of Maharashtra provides quantitative evidence on the scale of educational support. In 2023-24, 1,18,844 students benefited from the Government of India Post-Matric Scholarship, while 54,708 tribal students benefited from government hostel facilities (Government of Maharashtra, 2024).

The literature and policy evidence therefore support an integrated understanding of tribal higher education in which economic assistance, residential support, academic preparedness, digital access and institutional guidance are considered together.

Objectives of the Study

- To review the status of tribal students in higher education in Maharashtra.
- To examine the major socio-economic challenges affecting tribal students' participation in higher education.
- To identify major educational challenges faced by tribal students.
- To review major government initiatives supporting higher education among tribal students in Maharashtra.
- To examine the role of scholarships, hostels and other educational support mechanisms.
- To suggest measures for improving access, retention and educational opportunities among tribal students.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical secondary-data research design.

Nature of the Study

The present study is descriptive and review-based in nature. It focuses on the socio-economic and educational challenges faced by tribal students in accessing and continuing higher education in Maharashtra. The present study is based on secondary data collected from government reports, official statistical databases, policy documents and relevant academic literature. No primary survey or field investigation was conducted for the present study. The study therefore does not involve respondents, questionnaires, interviews or field-based data collection. The available secondary information has been reviewed and interpreted to understand major educational challenges, socio-economic constraints and government support mechanisms relating to tribal students in higher education.

Sources of Data

The study draws upon secondary information obtained from reliable and publicly available sources. Major sources include reports and statistical publications of the Government of India, Ministry of Education, All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of Maharashtra, Maharashtra Economic Survey, Tribal Development Department, Maharashtra State Data Bank and relevant academic literature. Government schemes and educational support

measures relating to tribal students were also reviewed through official departmental documents and publications.

Method of Analysis

The collected information was organised thematically. Available numerical information was presented in tables and interpreted descriptively. Comparative interpretation was used where data for more than one year were available. The study does not construct primary estimates or infer individual-level experiences from aggregate administrative data.

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on tribal students and higher education in Maharashtra. As a secondary-data study, its findings depend on the availability, coverage, definitions and reporting practices of the respective data sources. Government statistics may differ in reference year and population coverage. The study therefore presents an evidence-based review rather than a primary assessment of every tribal student's experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scheduled Tribe Participation in Higher Education

The national higher education data provide a broader context for understanding the participation of ST students, including students from Maharashtra.

The Table 1 indicates that ST enrolment in higher education increased from 24.12 lakh to 27.10 lakh. Female ST enrolment also increased. In 2021-22, ST students represented 6.3 per cent of total higher education enrolment and the ST Gross Enrolment Ratio was 21.2. The figures indicate increased participation while highlighting the importance of policies that support continuation and completion.

Financial Support for Tribal Students in Maharashtra

Financial assistance is a major component of educational support because direct and indirect costs can affect the ability of students from economically disadvantaged households to continue higher education (Table 2).

Beneficiaries under the Post-Matric Scholarship declined from 1,33,291 to 1,18,844. Expenditure increased in the same period. Beneficiary and expenditure trends should be interpreted cautiously because annual expenditure can be influenced by payment timing, pending claims, course categories, eligibility and administrative processing.

Government Hostel Support

Residential support is particularly relevant for tribal students who need to move away from their villages to pursue education.

The number of government hostels increased from 487 to 490, while beneficiary students increased from 47,271 to 54,708. The increase in beneficiaries indicates continued demand for residential educational support, particularly for students from remote and rural tribal areas (Tale 3).

Residential English-Medium Education

The reported number of beneficiary students declined from 56,602 to 46,852, while expenditure

Table 1 : Scheduled Tribe Enrolment in Higher Education in India

Indicator	2020-21	2021-22
Total ST enrolment	24.12 lakh	27.10 lakh
Female ST enrolment	12.21 lakh	13.46 lakh
ST share of total higher education enrolment	Not reported here	6.3%
ST Gross Enrolment Ratio	Not reported here	21.2

Source: All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22, Ministry of Education, Government of India

Table 2 : Beneficiaries of Selected Educational Financial Support Schemes for ST Students in Maharashtra

Scheme	2022-23 Beneficiaries	2023-24 Beneficiaries	2022-23 Expenditure (Rs. crore)	2023-24 Expenditure (Rs. crore)
Government of India Post-Matric Scholarship	1,33,291	1,18,844	180.26	678.37
Provision for Tuition and Examination Fee	8,394	5,732	55.00	75.04
Fee Reimbursement for Medical and Similar Courses	2,666	2,112	38.34	61.16

Source: Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2023-24, Government of Maharashtra.

Table 3 : Government Hostel Facilities and Beneficiaries among Tribal Students in Maharashtra

Particulars	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Number of hostels	487	487	490
Beneficiary students	47,271	52,378	54,708
Expenditure (Rs. crore)	160.29	164.74	230.44

Source: Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2023-24, Government of Maharashtra.

remained substantial. This pattern indicates the importance of examining programme coverage, eligibility, institutional capacity, student demand and implementation when interpreting annual expenditure and beneficiary figures.

The Table 4 summarises major educational support mechanisms. These interventions address tuition costs, accommodation, subsistence expenses and access to educational opportunities, indicating a multidimensional policy approach.

Table 4 : Beneficiaries of English-Medium Residential School Support for Tribal Students in Maharashtra

Indicator	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Beneficiary students	56,602	51,203	46,852
Expenditure (Rs. crore)	149.99	324.58	299.98

Source: Economic Survey of Maharashtra 2023-24, Government of Maharashtra.

Major Educational Support Measures

The Table 5 summarises major educational support mechanisms. These interventions address tuition costs, accommodation, subsistence expenses and access to educational opportunities, indicating a multidimensional policy approach.

Major Socio-Economic Challenges

Economic Constraints

Low household income can affect students' ability to meet educational expenses, including transportation, study materials, digital devices, accommodation and other indirect costs. Scholarship and fee-support mechanisms can reduce part of this burden, but indirect costs may remain important.

Geographical Accessibility

Many tribal communities are located in rural, hilly and geographically dispersed areas. Distance from colleges can create transportation, accommodation and time-related difficulties.

Accommodation

Students who relocate for higher education may face additional living expenses. Government hostel facilities and alternative financial assistance are therefore relevant to educational continuity.

Digital Divide

Students without reliable internet connectivity or suitable devices may experience difficulty accessing online learning materials and institutional services.

Family Educational Background

Parents with limited educational experience may have fewer opportunities to provide academic guidance or information about higher education pathways.

Major Educational Challenges

Academic Preparedness

Differences in school-level educational resources may influence students' preparedness for college and university education.

Language-Related Difficulties

Students may use tribal or regional languages at home while encountering Marathi, Hindi or English in formal education. Language differences can affect comprehension and classroom participation.

Table 5 : Major Educational Support Measures for Tribal Students in Maharashtra

Educational Intervention	Major Purpose
Government of India Post-Matric Scholarship	Financial support for post-matric and higher education
Tuition and Examination Fee Reimbursement	Reduction of educational fee burden
Government Tribal Hostels	Accommodation and related educational support
Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay Swayam Yojana	Financial assistance for eligible students unable to obtain government hostel admission
English-Medium Residential School Scheme	Access to English-medium residential education
Overseas Scholarship	Support for eligible ST students pursuing higher education abroad

Source: Tribal Development Department, Government of Maharashtra.

Access to Learning Resources

Books, reference materials, libraries, laboratories, computers and reliable internet access are important for higher education. Unequal access may create academic disadvantages.

Career Guidance

First-generation learners may have limited access to information about professional courses, competitive examinations, postgraduate opportunities and employment pathways.

Administrative and Scholarship Procedures

Students may require assistance with online applications, documentation, bank linkage, certificates and other administrative requirements associated with scholarships and welfare schemes.

Social Work Implications

The challenges identified in the review have direct implications for professional social work. Social workers can operate at individual, family, institutional and community levels to improve access to educational resources and welfare schemes.

- Educational counselling for students experiencing academic difficulties.
- Scholarship facilitation and assistance with government applications.
- Career guidance for higher education and employment opportunities.
- Digital literacy and digital access support.
- Family counselling and parent awareness regarding higher education.
- Peer support groups for first-generation college students.
- Community awareness programmes on educational schemes.
- Institutional coordination among colleges, Tribal Development Department and community organisations.
- Early identification and referral of students at risk of discontinuing education.
- Advocacy for inclusive educational services in tribal and remote areas.

Discussion

The secondary evidence reviewed in this study suggests that Maharashtra has developed a substantial institutional framework to support tribal students. Scholarships, fee reimbursement, hostels and other schemes address important economic and geographical barriers. The scale of these interventions demonstrates sustained public investment in tribal education.

At the same time, the existence of schemes should not be interpreted as evidence that all barriers have been removed. Financial assistance addresses direct economic constraints, while educational participation also depends upon academic preparedness, digital access, family support, language, transportation and institutional environment.

The increase in hostel beneficiaries between 2021-22 and 2023-24 is relevant because it indicates continuing demand for residential support. Scholarship and fee-support programmes remain important for reducing direct educational costs. The evidence therefore supports an integrated approach in which financial, academic, digital, residential and psychosocial support are coordinated.

Because this study uses aggregate secondary data, it cannot determine the prevalence of particular challenges among individual tribal students. Further primary research at district and institutional levels would be useful for examining student experiences, retention, academic performance and the effectiveness of specific interventions.

Suggestions:

- Strengthen scholarship delivery mechanisms and reduce delays in processing eligible applications.
- Expand hostel capacity in areas where tribal students travel substantial distances for higher education.
- Improve digital access through college-level digital learning centres, internet facilities and device-support programmes.
- Provide academic bridge and remedial programmes for students entering higher education from disadvantaged educational backgrounds.
- Strengthen language support, particularly in English and academic Marathi/Hindi where required by the curriculum.
- Establish systematic career counselling in colleges with significant tribal student enrolment.
- Develop student support cells addressing scholarship, accommodation, academic and psychosocial needs.

- Strengthen parental and community awareness regarding higher education opportunities and government schemes.
- Use social workers and counsellors to identify students at risk of educational discontinuation.
- Improve monitoring and evaluation of educational schemes using indicators such as enrolment, retention, completion, scholarship delivery and transition to employment or higher studies.

Conclusion

Higher education has significant potential to contribute to the social and economic development of tribal communities in Maharashtra. Available secondary evidence demonstrates that the state has developed multiple interventions to improve educational access, including post-matric scholarships, fee reimbursement, government hostels and financial assistance for students who cannot obtain hostel accommodation.

The data reviewed in this paper demonstrate continued demand for educational support. In 2023-24, 1,18,844 students benefited from the Government of India Post-Matric Scholarship in Maharashtra, while 54,708 tribal students benefited from government hostel facilities. These programmes address important financial and residential barriers.

Nevertheless, educational inclusion cannot be achieved through financial assistance alone. Socio-economic conditions, geographical location, academic preparedness, language, digital access, accommodation, family support and career information influence the educational experience of tribal students.

A comprehensive approach combining financial, academic, technological, residential and psychosocial support is therefore necessary. Social work has an important role in connecting students and families with educational institutions and government welfare mechanisms. Strengthening institutional support and ensuring timely access to existing schemes can contribute to improved participation, retention and completion of higher education among tribal students in Maharashtra.

Acknowledgment

The author acknowledges the Government of Maharashtra, Tribal Development Department, Maharashtra State Data Bank and Ministry of Education, Government of India, for making relevant statistical and policy information publicly available.

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