

## Vulnerable Communities

*Strengthening government schools is a concrete step that ought to be taken.*

*Kalpna Kannabiran, professor and director at the Council for Social Development, Hyderabad, writes:*

Results from a recent survey have highlighted again the specific and continuing vulnerabilities of “denotified,” nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes—especially in relation to the persistent disparities in access to education and employment and the ever-looming fear of stigma and criminalisation faced by these communities. In the past, these issues have been highlighted by the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (Renke Commission 2008), the Report of the National Advisory Council Working Group on Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (2011), and the Report of the High Level Committee on Socio-economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India (Xaxa Committee 2014), among others. Given the paucity of reliable data on socio-economic and educational status of these communities, the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) sponsored a study covering nine states to examine the socio-economic status and educational attainment of these communities.

The Council for Social Development, Hyderabad, carried out the study between 2012 and 2015 and covered 13,000 households in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Goa, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Of the 306 communities listed by the Renke Commission, this study covered 76 (66% Other Backward Class, 16% Scheduled Caste and 18% Scheduled Tribe) and included communities that were victims of labelling as well as those that did not face criminal targeting. A separate segment of the questionnaire explored the specific impacts of criminal labelling. Overall, the study reiterated the close relationship between poor socio-economic conditions, stigmatisation and low educational attainment of the “denotified” and nomadic tribes.

The communities surveyed were predominantly rural, reporting a long duration of stay (around 30 years) in their present location indicating a shift from nomadism to settled residence. The proportion of households that continue traditional work as the primary occupation was marginal across the states except Gujarat (25% of the households) and Madhya Pradesh (22%). The study shows that many of these families are now moving to the lowest levels of other livelihoods like non-agricultural labour. Forced migration has a direct bearing on family stability and educational access. A distinction must be made between cultures of nomadism (where the community negotiates mobility, settlement and residence in familiar ways that are culturally rooted), and forced/distress migration, which throws communities into precarity at every level. Migration was high in Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh at 40%, and 59% in Telangana. In Telangana, 54% of migrant households reported migration once a year with around 80% reporting one- to three-month duration. Wage labour accounted for 31% of total households. In Tamil Nadu, 53% of households reported non-agricultural labour as their primary occupation.

The educational status of “denotified” communities across states reveals that the “never-enrolled” were high across states, more than a quarter, except in Maharashtra (5.5%), Tamil Nadu (18%) and Andhra Pradesh (21%). However, the “completion” reported by respondents indicates discontinuation of education after primary or at best secondary school in a majority of cases. Migration was cited as a major reason for dropping out of school or not enrolling children across states. Interviews with teachers in Madhya Pradesh, for instance, reveal the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes that inhibit teacher–pupil relations, aggravate absenteeism and retard retention at the school level.

Hostels and ashram schools have been part of efforts to universalise education among vulnerable Adivasi communities. The Renke Commission revealed a sharp gender disparity in accessing hostels at primary and upper primary levels, but also a virtual disappearance of boys at the secondary and higher secondary levels. The present study does not show that provision of residential schools for children from denotified communities has significantly enhanced educational attainment.

Across the states, the involvement of parents in decision-making with respect to education and schooling of children was found to be lacking. While this might be in part due to the lack of education and awareness among parents, a deeper reason lies in the physical and social distance of the school from their habitations. Notwithstanding this trend, parents wanted both their sons and daughters to study well and secure government jobs. Given that distance to the school was a major factor in obstructing uninterrupted schooling, the reduction in dropouts and increase in retention by schools might be possible by locating schools in the proximity of neighbourhoods and habitations. This will also ensure more active participation of parents and community in the school lives of their children.

A majority of the students across the nine states that participated in this study attended government schools—between 88% and 90% in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh and 75% in Telangana and Goa. Although there is a proliferation of private schools across the country, this study has shown yet again that children from the most marginalised communities continue to attend government schools. Strengthening the government schooling system is an immediate need—in terms of infrastructure, teacher capabilities, and curricular reform.

More generally, the study points to the inadequacy of existing institutional arrangements which are minimal and poor in quality, and ridden with in-built forms of exclusion that obstruct schooling. The findings also highlight how specific local factors influence the access communities have to these arrangements. Evidence suggests that many existing measures do not recognise the specificities of aspirations and needs of these vulnerable communities.