

EDUCATION AS A DOUBLE-EDGED WEAPON – SIGNIFICANCE AND CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION IN RURAL AND TRIBAL GIRLS' LIVES

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Abstract

This paper, based on my doctoral thesis, explores the significance of education in the lives of rural and tribal girls in India, situating it within a conceptualisation of education as a double-edged “weapon”. It starts by critiquing the popular discourse on girls’ education which paints an overly positive picture of the “triumphs” of educating girls, especially those located in the Global South, in bringing about social and economic progress. This discourse not only instrumentalises girls as indicators of national progress and development, it also fails to acknowledge the unique social as well as material challenges faced by marginalised girls in accessing and participating in formal education. Further, this discourse cannot fully capture the depth and nuances of marginalised girls’ engagement with education, the significance education holds in their lives, and the questions it raises from a social justice perspective. Employing a participatory methodology that centres the voices and experiences of rural and tribal girls from the Nashik district of Maharashtra, India, this paper analyses the material and structural factors mediating girls’ access to formal education, and the challenges as well as possibilities they produce for girls to go to school. Further to this, the paper also explores how education becomes another disciplinary structure in their lives, and the ways in which girls negotiate, resist, or reimagine their relationship to education in order to interrupt dominant narratives of education as an unquestioned vehicle towards progress. In doing this, this paper reimagines education as simultaneously a weapon of “destruction” linked to existing structures of power, as well as a weapon of “de-construction”, enabling those who encounter it to “deconstruct”, i.e. become aware of as well as collectively formulate critical and creative strategies to challenge the structural webs enmeshing all of us. Through this reimagination, I hope to nuance the connections made between education, development, and progress, which can inform education policy and programming from a social justice perspective. Finally, by highlighting the voices of marginalised girls who are silenced within development scholarship and policy discourse, the paper hopes to centre girls as knowledge producers and experts on their own lives and education, and create new methodological pathways for amplifying marginalised girls in education discourse and policy.

Keywords: *Girls’ education, rural girls, participatory research, education policy.*

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, girls’ education has emerged as the key vehicle of global development agendas. Across policy documents, donor frameworks, and popular discourse (Johnson, 2021), educating girls—particularly those located in the Global South—is portrayed as an unequivocal global “commonsense” and a universal solution to poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment (Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Purewal, 2015; Unterhalter, 2023). Girls’ education is repeatedly framed as a catalyst for accelerating economic growth, improving health outcomes, eradicating poverty, and bringing social progress. While such claims have helped mobilise attention and resources to educating girls – and indeed improved it to a significant extent, as macro data in reports such as the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2024) and the Equal Measures 2030 SDG Gender Index (2022) indicate – they have also produced a celebratory and instrumentalist narrative that obscures the lived realities of marginalised girls whose access to school continues to be mediated within precarious social and material conditions.

Recent global policy papers such as by Psaki et al. (2022) are indicative of a trend in education policy discourse that overlooks material and structural realities in its portrayal of girls' education as the panacea to current socio-economic problems (Unterhalter, 2023). Such discourses employ a thoroughly neoliberal vision of education and development, one that instrumentalises the bodies and minds of some of the most materially impoverished girls to not only lift themselves out of poverty and underdevelopment (Murphy, 2012), but uplift their families and communities as well (Chant, 2016; Wilson, 2015). Further, this discourse of triumph forecloses more critical engagements with education as a social institution.

This paper, based on my doctoral research (Anita, 2025), interrogates this popular yoking of girls' education to progress by examining the significance of education in the lives of rural and tribal girls in the Nashik district of Maharashtra, India. Rather than treating education as an unquestioned pathway to progress, the paper conceptualises education as a double-edged "weapon": one that simultaneously reproduces existing structures of power and inequality, while also holding the potential for critical awareness, resistance, and collective reimagining. By centring girls' voices and experiences, the paper seeks to complicate linear narratives linking education, development, and progress, and to foreground girls as knowledge producers and experts on their own lives.

2. Rethinking girls' education and development

This discourse of triumph about girls' education is deeply shaped within a neoliberal development paradigm that foregrounds individual empowerment, measurable outcomes, and returns on investment (Chant, 2016; Murphy, 2012; Shain, 2013; Wilson, 2015). Within this framework, girls are often positioned as instruments of national development rather than as subjects with complex social identities and aspirations. Indicators such as enrolment, retention, and completion rates are mobilised to demonstrate success, while structural inequalities related to caste, tribe, class, gender, and geography are rendered secondary or invisible.

My research demonstrates that marginalised girls, particularly those from rural and tribal communities, access education in precarious and conditional ways, limited by a dense web of social, material, and institutional constraints. Poverty, precarious livelihoods, migration, domestic and care responsibilities, early marriage, and gendered norms around mobility and respectability all shape whether and how girls are able to attend school. At the same time, schools themselves are not neutral spaces. They are embedded within broader hierarchies of gender, caste, and class and often reproduce exclusionary practices that marginalise rural, Dalit, and tribal girls within the classroom (Nambissan, 2000; Paik, 2009; Velaskar, 2012).

Mainstream development narratives tend to gloss over these complexities, celebrating aggregate gains while failing to account for who is left behind and at what cost. Moreover, they are ill-equipped to capture how girls themselves understand education, the meanings they attach to schooling, and the ambivalences and contradictions that characterise their educational journeys. From a social justice perspective, this raises important questions about whose interests are being served by education, whose knowledge is being valued, and how power operates within and through educational institutions.

3. Methodology: Centring girls' voices

This paper draws on a participatory action research conducted with rural and tribal girls in the Nashik district of India. The research was guided by a commitment to feminist and social justice methodologies that seek to disrupt hierarchical relations between the researcher and participants, and to centre marginalised voices within knowledge production.

The participatory element of the research was made possible by the co-collaborators – girls from the research sites who were invited to become co-investigators. Fourteen girls joined the research as co-collaborators and received training in research methods and ethical frameworks. They collected data from other girls in their schools, colleges, or villages. Participants included girls aged 14-25 years who were resident in villages across the Nashik district. They included a mix of girls enrolled in government schools, private schools, graduate degree courses, vocational courses, and those who had dropped out of school. Most were from Adivasi (tribal) communities and agrarian or wage-labour households. Co-collaborators as well as participants signed consent forms before data were collected, and in case of minors, consent forms were also signed by their parent or guardian. The names of all participants as well as co-collaborators have been changed to protect their privacy, unless explicitly stated by them to retain their names.

Data were generated through a combination of in-depth interviews, group discussions, and structured journaling that enabled girls to articulate their experiences, aspirations, and critiques in their own terms. Rather than treating girls as passive respondents, the research positioned them as active interlocutors whose insights could challenge dominant assumptions about education and empowerment.

This methodological approach not only produced rich empirical material but also revealed the limitations of conventional research tools in capturing the everyday negotiations through which girls make sense of their education. By creating spaces for individual as well as collective reflection and dialogue, the study illuminated how girls interpret education in relation to their social worlds, futures, and sense of selves.

4. Accessing school: Material and structural constraints

Girls' access to formal education in rural Nashik is shaped by a range of intersecting material and structural factors. Economic precarity remains a central constraint. Many families rely on seasonal agricultural labour or migration for survival, disrupting girls' schooling and contributing to irregular attendance and dropout. Direct and indirect costs of education, including uniforms, school supplies, transport, and examination fees, further strain household resources, despite the nominally free nature of government schooling in India.

Within households, girls' schooling is often negotiated alongside expectations of care work, sibling supervision, and participation in agricultural labour. While parents may express support for education in principle, girls' attendance is frequently contingent on their ability to fulfil these gendered obligations. Girls repeatedly describe how their domestic and care responsibilities mediate their everyday relationship with school. Divya, a secondary school student, explains:

"I need to finish all the chores at home before I can go to school. And when I come back, there are even more chores to do... From farming to washing utensils to sweeping to filling water, doing all this is not only time-consuming but also consuming me (*vel tar jato, amche praan pan jate*)."

Education thus becomes something that needs to be fitted around non-negotiable but unpaid labour, rather than an unquestioned right.

Geography also plays a significant role. Long distances to secondary schools, inadequate transport, and unsafe travel routes disproportionately affect girls, whose mobility is subjected to further surveillance and restrictions due to concerns about safety and honour. Sneha, reflecting on her daily journey to school, notes:

"On the way, boys on motorcycles tease and harass the girls who are on their way to school – they whistle at us and say nasty things. But if someone from our village sees this, they go and complain to our parents as if it is the girl's fault."

Such everyday harassment, coupled with the fear of reputational damage, often results in increased restrictions on girls or withdrawal from school altogether. For tribal girls living in remote hamlets, daily travel to school can be physically exhausting and emotionally taxing, reinforcing gendered expectations that prioritise domestic responsibilities over education.

5. Schooling as discipline and regulation

Beyond issues of access, education functions as a powerful disciplinary structure in girls' lives. Schools regulate girls' bodies, time, and behaviour in ways that reflect and reinforce dominant norms of femininity, respectability, and obedience. Restrictions on dress and comportment, surveillance of interactions with boys, and moral instruction all contribute to shape girls into particular kinds of gendered subjects.

Girls are acutely aware that their presence in school is tied to expectations of 'proper' behaviour. They often question the asymmetry of these expectations:

"The parents tell the girl, keep your head down, go to school properly, keep your honour, don't talk to any boy. Why are these restrictions imposed on the girls and not the boys?"

For tribal girls, these disciplinary practices are further inflected by casteist and cultural hierarchies. Their languages, knowledges, and ways of being are marginalised within curricula and classroom interactions, producing feelings of alienation and inadequacy. Teachers sometimes hold deficit views of tribal students, interpreting their silence or disengagement as lack of ability or motivation rather than as responses to exclusionary pedagogies (Nambissan, 2000; Paik, 2009). Academic evaluation systems that privilege rote learning disadvantage first-generation learners, especially girls, many of whom lack support outside school.

Experiences of failure and humiliation shape how girls perceive themselves as students. Several girls described school as a space where they were constantly reminded of their limitations, even while being told that education was the only route to a better future. In this sense, education operates as a weapon of “destruction”, eroding confidence and reproducing social hierarchies even as it promises mobility and empowerment.

6. Negotiation, resistance and reimagination

Despite these constraints, girls are not just passive recipients of education. The participatory action research revealed multiple ways in which girls negotiate, resist, and reimagine their relationship to education. For many, education represents a temporary reprieve from domestic labour and early marriage. Girls often described school as the only space where they could be with friends, speak freely, and imagine futures beyond those of immediate survival.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, this significance became particularly visible. Sonali, a co-collaborator, reflected after an interview:

“Girls don’t realise the importance of education unless they are out of school. When they have to sit at home with nothing to do except household chores and farm work, they understand the true importance of school.”

Girls also articulated strategic engagements with education. Some viewed schooling as a way to delay marriage, while others saw literacy as a form of protection against systemic exploitation. Girls who had dropped out consistently identified literacy as the most valuable outcome of their schooling, enabling them to read documents, sign forms, and navigate bureaucratic systems independently.

These negotiations often involved what girls described as *dhadpad*—a term that recurred across interviews and collective discussions to describe their efforts to persist, manoeuvre, and struggle within tightly bounded structural constraints. *Dhadpad* is difficult to translate directly. It connotes noise, movement, and exertion, evoking both a restless thrashing against constraints and the painstaking work of building something piece by piece.

Girls used *dhadpad* to describe material struggles—such as gathering money for uniforms, fees, or transport (*paise gola karayla khup dhadpad keli*)—as well as relational and discursive struggles, such as repeatedly persuading parents to let them continue schooling or enrol in skill-training programmes (*gharche tayar hotil yasathi khup dhadpad karavi lagli*). Importantly, *dhadpad* was not narrated as heroic resistance or guaranteed success. Rather, girls spoke of it as exhausting, uncertain, and often only partially effective.

At times, *dhadpad* functioned as a survival strategy: a way to make life within oppressive conditions marginally more liveable. At other times, it reflected an emergent critical awareness of structural limits—an understanding of where boundaries lay, and how far they could be stretched without provoking punitive consequences such as withdrawal from school or forced marriage. In this sense, *dhadpad* signals neither passive compliance nor overt rebellion, but an agentive practice that begins and ends somewhere in the middle of structural bounds.

When enacted within the liminality of school, *dhadpad* reveals the double-edged nature of education itself. On one hand, it is part of the labour required to remain a school-going subject under conditions of poverty, patriarchy, and caste hierarchy. On the other, it becomes a process of “de-construction” engendered through education: through repeated effort, reflection, and collective articulation, girls begin to recognise the structural forces shaping their lives and imagine small but meaningful disruptions within them. In this way, *dhadpad* sharpens our understanding of education not as a straightforward vehicle of empowerment, but as a contested terrain where awareness, endurance, and fragile possibilities for transformation are produced alongside discipline and extraction.

7. Education, power and social justice

Reimagining education as a double-edged weapon allows for a more nuanced understanding of its role in the lives of marginalised girls. On the one hand, education is deeply entangled with systems of power that discipline girls into obedient, compliant, and labouring subjects of neoliberal development as well as caste-patriarchy. On the other hand, it can generate moments of critical consciousness and possibility that exceed its instrumental functions.

From a social justice perspective, this requires moving beyond narrow metrics of success to attend to questions of dignity, recognition, and voice. It calls for education policies and programmes that are responsive to the material realities of rural and tribal girls, that challenge rather than reproduce hierarchies, and that value girls’ knowledge and experiences as central to educational transformation.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued for a critical re-engagement with girls' education by foregrounding the lived experiences of rural and tribal girls in India. By conceptualising education as a double-edged weapon, it challenges celebratory development narratives and highlights the contradictions, ambivalences, and *dhadpad* that shape marginalised girls' educational journeys.

Centred on participatory research and girls' voices, the analysis demonstrates that education is neither a simple solution nor an inherently emancipatory force. Instead, it is a contested terrain where power is reproduced and resisted, and where possibilities for de-construction and collective reimagining emerge. Recognising girls as knowledge producers and experts on their own lives is essential for building more just and meaningful educational futures.

By nuancing the links between education, development, and progress, this paper offers a new conceptual lens to critical education and development studies, as well as insights for policy and practice grounded in social justice.

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