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Educational Discontinuation Among Scheduled Caste Students In Punjab: A Case Study Analysis

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Abstract

Educational discontinuation among Scheduled Caste (SC) students is a critical concern impacting the broader objectives of equitable access to higher education in India. This paper presents an in-depth examination of the causes behind high dropout rates among SC students in Punjab, employing a case study approach to explore real-life experiences. The study investigates 6 individuals from various districts in Punjab, capturing their personal, familial, and educational backgrounds to better understand the barriers they face. Findings reveal that economic hardship is a predominant factor driving these students to discontinue their education. Most families struggle to meet basic expenses, and the additional financial burden of college fees, transportation, and study materials often makes higher education unattainable. Furthermore, institutional inadequacies, such as limited classroom space, insufficient teaching staff, and inadequate learning resources, create an unsupportive academic environment, discouraging students from continuing their studies.

Cultural and gender-based expectations also heavily influence dropout rates, particularly for female students, who are often expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities or face safety concerns in commuting to distant colleges. Additionally, caste-based discrimination, both subtle and overt, further marginalizes SC students, impacting their motivation and sense of belonging in academic settings. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive policy interventions, including targeted financial aid, enhanced infrastructure, and anti-discrimination measures, to support SC students in overcoming these barriers. By addressing these socio-economic and institutional challenges, policymakers can foster a more inclusive educational environment that

enables SC students to achieve their academic aspirations and improve their socio-economic status. This study contributes valuable insights into the complex interplay of factors influencing educational discontinuation among SC students, highlighting the urgent need for inclusive educational reforms in Punjab and beyond.

Keywords Educational Discontinuation, Scheduled Castes, Dropout Rates, Socio-Economic Factors, Punjab, Higher Education

Introduction:

Education is one of the most powerful means to empower the younger generation, providing them with knowledge of the past and skills for the present to build a better future. It fosters critical thinking, raises awareness, and develops expertise, which can often help families break free from cycles of poverty and open doors to fulfilling career opportunities. India's Vision 2030 for school education aims to deliver high-quality learning to every school-aged child. However, dropout rates remain a significant issue, with students leaving school or college before completing their intended academic programs. This premature departure affects all demographics, limiting opportunities and stifling personal growth.

Despite rising enrolment numbers in India, dropout rates have either risen or remained stagnant, particularly at the secondary level. The UDISE+ 2021 data shows a troubling 12.6% dropout rate at the secondary level, while primary and upper primary levels are much lower, at 1.5% and 3%, respectively. High dropout rates create barriers to India's educational goals, pointing to inefficiencies within the system and suggesting unmet needs among students who struggle to stay engaged academically or behaviorally. The Government of India has introduced various initiatives, including the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the Right to Education Act, Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, and NISHTHA, all designed to improve access, retention, and quality in education. However, these initiatives have yet to fully achieve their goals, highlighting the need to address the underlying reasons students leave school prematurely.

Among the most affected are Scheduled Caste (SC) students, whose dropout rates present a distinct challenge that not only affects individuals but also hinders the broader goals of social equity and educational inclusion. Despite policy measures to promote educational access for marginalised groups, SC students continue to experience high dropout rates, especially in secondary and post-secondary stages. Financial constraints, inadequate institutional support, societal biases, and cultural expectations uniquely impact these students, often creating insurmountable barriers to continued education. In Punjab, a state with a significant SC population, these dropout trends are particularly concerning, underscoring the urgent need for targeted policies and interventions that address the specific challenges faced by SC communities.

Background of study:

India has made significant strides in improving its literacy rate and elementary school enrollment since gaining independence. According to the latest census data, the adult literacy rate rose from 65% in 2001 to 74% in 2011. By 2007, around 95% of children of primary school age were literate, and the completion rate for primary education also saw a notable increase, rising from 72.4% in 2001 to 85.7% in 2006, with only minor differences between boys and girls. However, despite these advancements, secondary education continues to face challenges. A UNICEF report from 2011 highlighted that the secondary school attendance rate for girls was only 48%, which is significantly lower than the elementary school attendance rate of 84%. For boys, the attendance rate at the secondary level was 58.5%, compared to 85.2% at the primary level.

Moreover, the issue of early dropouts from high school persists, despite the overall progress in education. In Punjab, for instance, the literacy rate among individuals aged 7 and above was recorded at 75.84% in 2011. The attendance rate at the primary level in the state aligns with the national average, indicating that while progress has been made in early education, secondary education still requires urgent attention to reduce dropout rates and improve attendance.

The table 1 shows the dropout rates (2021-22) between India and Punjab across different educational level reveals notable disparities. At the primary level, dropout rates are relatively low for both regions; however, Punjab shows a slightly lower overall rate (1.3%) compared to India (1.5%), with girls in Punjab having the lowest rate at 1%, as opposed to India's 1.4%. Moving to the upper primary level, a significant gap emerges: Punjab's dropout rate for girls is 7.1%, substantially lower than India's i.e.3.5%, and the overall dropout rate is also higher in Punjab (8%) as compared to India (3%). At the secondary level, dropout rates increase but remain more balanced between genders within each region. Punjab maintains a higher dropout rate overall (17.2%) compared to India (12.6%), with boys and girls in Punjab at 18.3% and 16%, respectively, as opposed to 13% and 12.3% for India. This data suggests that at school level Punjab has generally higher dropout rates as compared to the national dropout rates, except for the primary level.

Review of related literature:

The review of literature highlights various factors contributing to high school dropout rates over the years. According to Lamichhane et al. (2004) reported that most schools lack proper infrastructure, such as separate toilets for boys and girls, a playground, sufficient instructional materials, etc., which in turn facilitate dropout. Das and Saha (2014) highlighted regional differences in dropout rates across West Bengal, showing that poverty, family size, and parental education affect dropout rates. Gil et al. (2018) looked into dropout causes from the perspective of secondary teachers, who pointed out that lack of commitment from students, teachers, and parents frequently leads to school failure. Ghosh et al. (2018) investigated school absenteeism in Kolkata's

slums and found illness, bad weather, and family events were common reasons for students missing school. Tabassum (2019) reported a notably higher dropout rate among boys due to factors such as limited interest in academics, need for household support, economic hardship, and family migration. Mohalik, Sethy, and Sangeeta (2021) identified reasons including parents' work commitments, children's involvement in household tasks, younger sibling care, family relocation for work, and low academic aspirations from parents, along with limited teacher presence. Overall, the literature reveals that dropout rates are influenced by economic challenges, insufficient infrastructure, migration, teacher shortages, lack of communication, and student health issues, often linked to limited hygiene awareness and healthcare access.

Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in its ability to highlight and deeply explore the complex factors that contribute to school dropouts among students, particularly within disadvantaged communities in Punjab. By using case studies, the research provides an in-depth understanding of how socio-economic hardships, family responsibilities, poor school infrastructure, inadequate educational resources, and community expectations collectively influence students' decisions to leave school prematurely. The findings can guide policymakers and educators in developing targeted interventions, such as improving school facilities, increasing teacher support, and implementing financial aid programs. These efforts are crucial for creating an equitable educational environment, enhancing student retention, and ultimately breaking cycles of poverty through accessible education. This study's insights may contribute valuable knowledge that can be applied to address dropout issues across similar communities, both within India and globally.

Objective of the study:

To investigate the primary factors contributing to school dropouts among scheduled caste students in Punjab.

Research Methodology:

This research employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate the factors leading to school dropout among students in Punjab. Case studies provide an in-depth exploration of individual experiences within real-life contexts, making this method well-suited for understanding the complex social, economic, and institutional challenges faced by dropouts. The study is based on six case studies conducted across various districts in Punjab, including Faridkot, Ferozpur, Bathinda, Patiala, Amritsar, and Hoshiarpur. Each case reflects unique circumstances that contribute to dropout decisions, such as family financial difficulties, inadequate school infrastructure, lack of support systems, and personal motivations.

The interviewees for this research were the volunteers willing to share personal experiences and details about various aspects of their lives, particularly before and during their decision to leave school. Participants were recruited within the community and chosen solely based on their experience of having dropped out of high school. Interviews were held in a private setting selected by the interviewee. It is also crucial that the interview questions were structured to gather enough relevant insights to develop a clear understanding of the factors that dropouts believe influenced their decision to discontinue their education.

Data Collection:

Data was collected through structured interviews with each participant, covering a period from 2022 to 2024 to capture a range of experiences and circumstances. The participants, ranging from secondary school students to early school leavers selected to represent a diverse group, with attention to varying educational levels, family backgrounds, and geographic locations within Punjab.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was applied to the data, focusing on recurring themes such as economic hardship, parental influence, infrastructure inadequacies, and societal pressures. Each case was analyzed individually to capture specific dropout factors, followed by a cross-case comparison to identify common patterns and unique challenges across cases. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the dropout phenomenon within the broader educational context of Punjab.

Case Studies:

The following are case studies of six individuals who dropped out of high school for various reasons. They were interviewed by the researcher to identify common experiences both before and during their decision to leave school. These individuals, found within the community, volunteered to share their stories with the hope of providing more detailed insights into the factors that influence students to drop out. Each participant was asked the same set of questions and encouraged to respond to any topics they felt comfortable discussing. The participants were selected from ages 15 to 19 to ensure a range of ages while keeping the information relevant. For confidentiality, their names have been changed.

1. This case study examines '**Subject-I**,' a 19-year-old boy from a Scheduled Caste family in Jaitu Mandi, Faridkot District, Punjab. Coming from a nuclear family with limited financial means, his father worked as a daily wage labourer, and his mother, who was uneducated, was a house wife. Subject-I completed the 9th standard at a Government Senior Secondary School with 69% but chose not to enroll in the 10th standard in 2020 due to dissatisfaction with the school's poor infrastructure and inadequate teaching quality. Issues like waterlogging, leaking roofs, and insufficient classrooms disrupted learning,

while teachers showed minimal engagement, focusing primarily around exam times. Financial constraints further influenced his decision. Until the 9th standard, schooling was low-cost, but fees and material expenses increased substantially. Subject-I believed he couldn't succeed in the 10th board exams without extra private tuition, which the family couldn't afford. Additionally, teacher shortages left subjects like English and science incomplete, causing him to feel unprepared. Despite the teachers' encouragement, he saw their attempts as formalities without practical solutions. While he aspired to uplift his family financially, Subject-I was cautious about his return to education, understanding limited employment opportunities without secondary qualifications in his village.

2. This case study examines '**Subject-II**,' a 19-year-old boy from a Scheduled Caste family residing in Kasu Begu village, Ferozpur District, Punjab. Subject-II lived in a nuclear family of five, headed by his father, a 48-year-old illiterate daily wage labourer, and his mother, a 45-year-old housewife without formal education. His elder brother, aged 21, had completed middle school and worked in a marble factory, while his younger sister, aged 16, was studying in the 9th standard. Subject-II achieved a 65% score in the 9th standard at the Government Senior Secondary School in Noorpur Sethan village, approximately 6 kms. from his home. However, after completing the 9th standard in 2019, he opted not to enroll in the 10th standard due to dissatisfaction with the school's infrastructure, which he described as deteriorated, with issues like waterlogging, leaking roofs, and a lack of classrooms. These factors, coupled with a shortage of teachers, hindered the learning process and coverage of essential subjects. Financial constraints were the primary cause of Subject-II's dropout. His family's limited resources, worsened by wedding expenses for his elder brother, prevented them from affording additional tuition fees needed to pass the 10th standard board Examination. Subject-II expressed frustration with the government school system and aimed to work temporarily to help with family debts, intending to complete his education later through the National Open School. This case underscores how financial limitations and inadequate rural school infrastructure contribute to student dropouts in secondary education.

3. This case study explores the life of '**Subject-III**,' a 17-year-old girl from a Scheduled Caste family in Dan Singh Wala Bhara, Bathinda District, Punjab. Adopted by her maternal family, Subject-III belonged to a nuclear family of five, led by her 51-year-old father, an illiterate cobbler, and her 42-year-old mother, who assisted in his work and had no formal education. As the eldest child, she had two younger brothers enrolled in elementary school.

Subject-III left school in 2022 after failing her 9th standard board Examinations. She had previously maintained an average score of 60% up to the 8th standard, where examinations were less challenging and closely aligned with classroom instruction. However, she noted that teachers often didn't cover the full curriculum, leaving gaps in subjects like mathematics and English. Struggling particularly in these subjects, she cited inadequate teaching time and her family's financial inability to afford private tuition, unlike her peers who relied on extra tutoring to pass.

Subject-III's motivation to study declined, and she dismissed the option of re-enrolling through open school, doubting her ability to succeed without guidance. This case highlights the combined impact of limited educational resources, insufficient instruction in rural schools, and financial constraints that hinder academic progress for students like Subject-III.

4. This case study examines the life of '**Subject-IV**,' a 18-year-old boy from a Scheduled Caste family in Sekhpura, Patiala District. Following the death of his father during the spread of Covid-19 in 2020, Subject-IV's family faced significant financial difficulties. His mother, aged 46 and uneducated, worked as a daily wage labourer, while his 20-year-old sister, who completed primary school, contributed by sewing and managing domestic tasks. Subject-IV had two younger siblings in elementary school. Due to the family's economic instability, Subject-IV had to drop out of school in October 2020, during his 9th standard. After completing the 8th standard, he sought work as a barber in the village, commuting on his late father's bicycle. Although he demonstrated above-average academic performance and aspired to become a teacher, financial pressures forced him into child labour, disrupting his educational goals.

When teachers visited to offer support, no viable solutions were presented. Subject-IV expressed interest in completing his education through open school but lacked the necessary funds for fees. Despite his challenging circumstances, he remained hopeful, intending to save money for future exams if he received help with subjects like mathematics and English. This case highlights the urgent need for scholarships and tutoring to assist students facing similar hardships.

5. This case study examines the life of '**Subject-V**,' a 16-year-old adolescent from a Scheduled Caste family in Bhagtanwala, Amritsar District, Punjab. Subject-V's family consists of six members. Tragically, his father passed away during Covid-19 in 2020, leaving behind his 46-year-old wife, who had no formal education. She now works as a daily wage labourer, primarily in construction, to support the family. Subject-V's elder sister, aged 19, also contributes by managing household chores and sewing to help meet their financial needs. The family's situation worsened after the father's death, as medical expenses had depleted their savings, leaving them in a dilapidated house needing urgent repairs. In August 2021, during his 9th standard at the Government Senior Secondary School, Subject-V discontinued his education due to the financial strain. He took a job as a barber, using his late father's bicycle for commuting. Despite these challenges, he demonstrated above-average academic performance and aspired to pursue Elementary Teachers Training (ETT) to become a teacher. While he considered enrolling in an open school to continue his education, financial constraints hindered this plan. Subject-V's story highlights the resilience of adolescents facing economic hardships and familial responsibilities.

6. **Subject-VI** is a 16-year-old girl from a Scheduled Caste family in Baroti village, Hoshiarpur District, who faces significant educational challenges due to financial constraints and societal expectations. Living in a family of six, her father works as a daily-wage labourer while her mother is a homemaker. Despite their meagre income, Subject-VI's parents value education and encourage their children to pursue it. Initially, she showed promise and dedication in her studies at the village school. However, financial limitations quickly became a significant barrier. The family struggled to afford costs associated with education, including textbooks, uniforms, and transportation. Additionally, societal expectations in the village prioritised household responsibilities for girls over education, which limited Subject-VI's opportunities to focus on her academic potential. The lack of proper infrastructure in the village school, such as insufficient teaching staff, overcrowded classrooms, and inadequate learning materials, further hindered her progress.
- Despite her resilience and determination, the overwhelming financial burden and societal pressures led Subject-VI to make the heart-wrenching decision to drop out of school at 16 to contribute to her family's income. Currently working as domestic help in nearby households, she remains hopeful of returning to education when circumstances improve. This case highlights the challenges faced by many Scheduled Caste families in rural areas, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to ensure equal access to education.

Results and Discussion:

The case studies of six individuals underscore several socio-economic and institutional causes leading to high dropout rates among SC students in Punjab. On the basis of the case studies following causes have been categorized as findings of the study:

1. **Economic Hardship:** Financial constraints were the most common factor across cases. Subjects I, II, IV, V, and VI reported significant financial pressures that forced them to leave school. Subject II, for instance, could not continue to the 10th grade as his family was unable to afford additional tutoring or examination fees. Similarly, Subjects IV and V had to take up jobs after the deaths of their fathers to support their families. Such economic limitations often made it challenging for students to afford the tuition and materials needed to complete secondary education.
2. **Institutional and Infrastructural Barriers:** Several students mentioned deteriorating school infrastructure, which hindered their learning experience. Subjects I and II cited issues like waterlogged classrooms, leaking roofs, and insufficient teaching staff. Subject III noted incomplete coverage of the curriculum due to teacher shortages, which left her feeling unprepared for exams. These infrastructural shortcomings further exacerbated students' lack of motivation and confidence in continuing their studies.
3. **Socio-Cultural Expectations:** Gender-specific societal pressures disproportionately affected female students. Subject VI, a young girl from a rural village, faced familial expectations to

prioritize household duties over education. This pressure led her to leave school and contribute to the family income instead. These gender-based roles, deeply embedded in rural Punjab's socio-cultural fabric, limited female students' access to higher education

4. **Psychosocial Impact of Caste-Based Discrimination:** Subtle forms of caste-based discrimination were reported as negatively impacting students' self-esteem and engagement. Subject I shared instances where he felt marginalized in academic settings, affecting his motivation to continue. This sense of exclusion, although not overtly recognized, contributed to a perception of isolation that further discouraged academic persistence among SC students.

These findings are consistent with broader research literature indicating that economic hardship, inadequate infrastructure, socio-cultural expectations, and caste discrimination play significant roles in high dropout rates among SC students. This study's case-based analysis highlights the necessity for a targeted, multifaceted approach in addressing these barriers to promote equitable access to education for SC students.

Conclusion:

This research provides a comprehensive understanding of the various factors influencing educational discontinuation among SC students in Punjab. Economic hardship, infrastructural deficiencies, socio-cultural expectations, and caste-based discrimination were found to significantly impact students' educational trajectories. Effective policy interventions are urgently needed, including increased financial support for economically disadvantaged families, infrastructural improvements in schools, community-based programs promoting female education, and anti-discrimination measures. Addressing these issues holistically can foster a supportive environment that enables SC students to fulfill their academic and career aspirations, contributing to broader social equity and educational inclusion in Punjab.

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