



Covid-19 Pandemic and Rising Dropouts in Odisha: A Situational Analysis

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Abstract: This study aims to comprehend the disparities and causes associated with secondary school dropouts in Odisha as a result of COVID-19. Due to the pandemic, the school dropout rate in rural and tribal areas of Odisha, especially among underprivileged children, has soared at an unprecedented rate. Despite the State Government's implementation of online education for students it is difficult for rural and tribal students to participate in e-learning due to the lack of access to mobile phones, internet connections and electricity. In addition, the precarious financial situation of parents due to the pandemic has been cited as one of the leading causes of student absenteeism. The situation is worsening among the students of ST and SC communities of Odisha, where the dropout rate is considerably high.

Keywords: Covid-19; Dropout; Odisha; tribals

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis had led to shutdowns, curfews and social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus. To counteract the pandemic's expected increased spread, the Indian government shut down public, and private institutions around the midway of March 2020. The closing of educational institutions, whether schools or colleges, has had serious repercussions on the worldwide educational system. The severe effect was not confined to the health sector alone but also spread to other areas. The Covid-19 pandemic had a lot of negative effects on schooling, most notably increasing the number of school dropouts in India. Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)¹ 2021 reported that the non-enrolment of students aged 6 to 14 in rural schools increased from 2.5% in 2018 to 4.6% in 2021. Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said in August 2021 that over 15 crore youngsters were not enrolled in any school². UNICEF estimated in March 2021 that the "closure of 1.5 million schools due to the pandemic and lockdowns in 2020 had impacted 247 million children enrolled in elementary and secondary schools"³.

If we look at the situation in Odisha, we will find that the dropout rate has gone up by a lot to 23.39 percent in 2019-20. For secondary sections, the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) went down from 57.51 percent in 2018-19 to 54 percent, particularly 62 percent in 2019-20⁴. The school dropout rate in Odisha has increased at an unprecedented pace as a result of Covid-19 in the rural zone where disadvantaged students are perceived to be at a larger risk of dropping out than their wealthy counterparts. Despite the State Government's introduction of online education for students, students in rural regions found it difficult to participate in e-learning due to a lack of amenities including mobile phones, internet connections, and electricity. In addition, the unstable financial circumstances of parents brought on by the pandemic's effects have been identified as one of the main reasons why kids skip school. Children are said to be vanishing from the educational landscape for a number of reasons, including prolonged school closures, lack of Internet connectivity, inability to acquire cellphones, and kids being persuaded to migrate in order to make quick money. The bulk of children under the age of 18 moves to Andhra Pradesh to work in the prawn's factory. Southern Odisha districts including Koraput, Malkangiri, Gajapati, Rayagada, Ganjam, and Nabarangpur have recorded high rates of school dropouts⁵.

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyse the extent of drop out level in Odisha during the pandemic.
2. To discuss the factors affecting the dropout rate.
3. To review the measures taken by state Government to curb the dropout problem.
4. To suggest measures for formulating strategies to reduce the dropout rate in post-pandemic Odishan society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shuja et al., (2022)⁶ finds in their study that, the shutdown of schools due to the pandemic has affected the social and economic sectors of the global population. Children from underprivileged families are disproportionately affected. This disparity will exacerbate the socioeconomic divide that already exists in the school system and other areas of society.

United Nations(2020)⁷ reported that nearly 1.6 billion students over 190 countries have been affected by the COVID-19 epidemic and has caused the greatest disruption in education systems in history. The closure of schools and other learning places has affected 94% of the world's student population, and up to 98% in low- and low-middle income nations. Many of the most vulnerable children, teenagers, and adults — those living in impoverished or rural regions, females, refugees, and individuals with disabilities – have less educational possibilities as a result of the current crisis.

Smith(2021)⁸ observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures have been one of the many societal disruptions that have occurred. As school administrators combat localized outbreaks and tried to ensure student and employee safety, intermittent re-openings are probable. Schools will confront a different reality upon resumption, with plans calling for smaller class sizes, delayed start times, and less interaction to facilitate social separation. Shutdowns during a large-scale health crisis are not only a break in learning but a disproportionately negative experience for the marginalized. Learning gaps will get worse because impromptu attempts to set up remote learning when schools are closed have mostly missed the most disadvantaged students.

ASER (2021)⁹ report states that despite the increase in smartphone availability from 36.5 percent in 2018 to 67.6 percent in 2021, online activities were more challenging for students in lower grades compared to those in higher grades. The inaccessibility of smartphones for kids and network connectivity concerns were the obstacles they faced.

According to Azim Premji University¹⁰ research, during the lockdowns, 92 percent of students lost at least one particular linguistic skill and 82 percent lost at least one arithmetic ability.

Choudhary (2021)¹¹ finds in her study that the COVID-19 epidemic threatens the significant progress that has been made in the educational sector. Due to the pandemic, up to 10 million girls are at danger of dropping out of secondary school. Increasing gender inequality and poverty pose a larger threat to the education of women. Long ago, the gender parity index value, which measures the ratio of females to boys in education, was less than one. In the last few years, it has levelled out, but the pandemic has exacerbated poverty, reversed migration, and caused job losses, putting vulnerable girls in danger of dropping out of school. In times of crisis, girls are more likely to be denied an education because they are forced into paid and unpaid labour as well as child marriage. Many adolescent females who quit attending school during the epidemic will likely never return.

Chaudhuri(2022)¹² stated many students were forced to quit during the outbreak, which resulted in an enormous loss of knowledge for those who remained in school. The digital divide is one of several obstacles. Depending on the state, compensatory measures might differ greatly. An all-India approach is completely absent. Schooling will become much more polarized, negating whatever progress that has been done by government schools. Higher dropout rates and a revival of illiteracy are possible outcomes.

The Women and Child Development Department¹³ reported that 7,717 adolescent girls (in the age group of 11 to 14 years) had dropped out of school in the 2021-22 academic session. In 2019-20, 8,168 students dropped out after secondary school in Odisha.

Muthuprasad et al., (2021)¹⁴ found in their research, the major hurdle that students encountered during the pandemic were difficulty in having access to the internet facility for which many students were unable to participate in the online lessons.

Hansdah et al.,(2020)¹⁵ stated in their survey data from three blocks of Mayurbhanj district, which has the highest concentration of tribal population in Odisha, educational status of children from the Munda, Kolha, and Santal tribal groups. They discovered that the dropout rate is higher in the age group of 15-16 years (secondary level), as compared to 6-14 years (primary level). Kolha children are more likely than Munda and Santal children to drop out of school in the elementary grades, although the dropout rates for the three communities children in the secondary grades

are nearly same. Children's educational outcomes are influenced by a variety of circumstances, and the COVID-19 epidemic has hampered tribal children's access to education because of the digital gap.

Significance of the Study

The study will be beneficial for designing policies for students who are more likely to drop out of school, as well as finding out the regions where they are most required for identifying the problems and their remedies. Additionally, it will assist with the understanding of regional challenges and the planning of future actions. This study will also aid in paving the way for the formulation of legislation that will assist in the achievement of the goals of universalizing education and providing education to all.

Data source

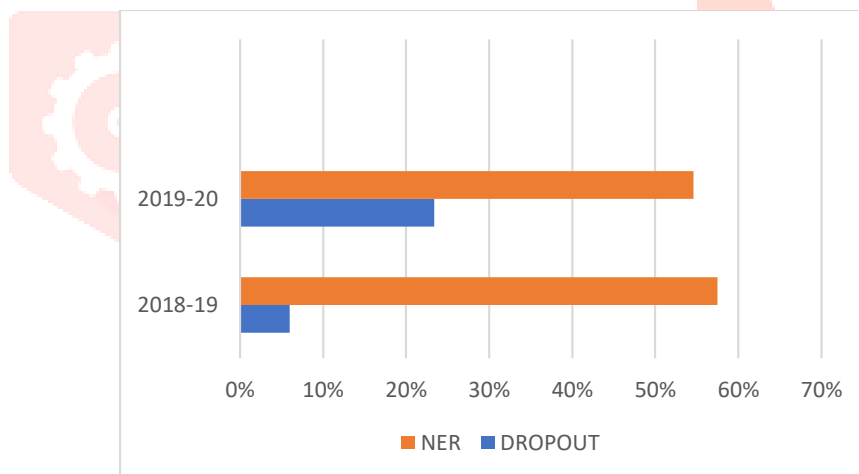
Data for this study has been obtained from secondary sources. The article seeks to evaluate the rising dropout rates during and after the pandemic in Odisha. The present study is purely significant and advances knowledge and comprehension of the causes and challenges faced by Odisha's educational system. For the purpose of examining the challenges and solutions of the suggested analysis, the researcher evaluated a variety of study-related material, including documents, research reports, data, speeches, books, articles, research papers, research journals, and periodicals etc.

Analysis and Discussion

The epidemic disrupted societal norms, forcing its own conventions on us and having a varied but mainly negative impact. Odisha's school dropout rate has risen unexpectedly as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak, especially in rural and tribal areas where disadvantaged students are more likely to abandon their studies midway.

Figure-1

Net enrollment ratio & dropout rate pre- and post-pandemic in primary, upper primary, and elementary schools of Odisha

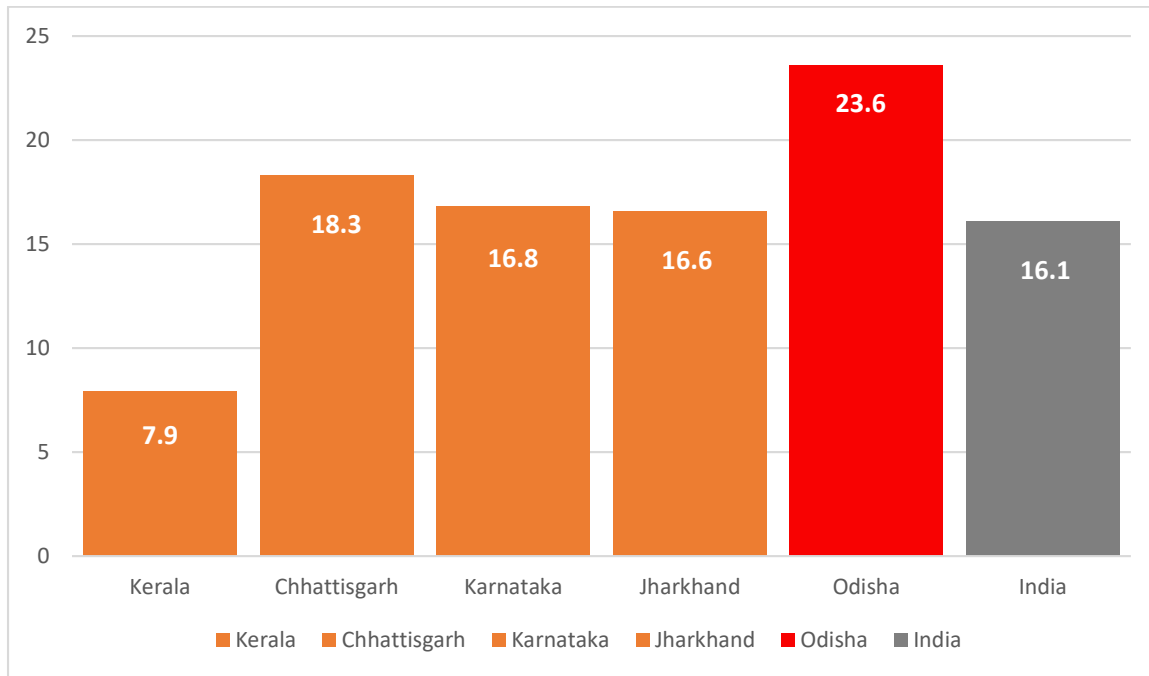


[Source- Indian Express]

The above figure shows that in 2018-19, the rate of dropout of the primary, upper primary, and the element school went down to 6%. In 2019-20, however, it rose to 23.39 %. For secondary schools, the Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) went down from 57.51 percent in 2018-19 to 54.62 percent in 2019-20.

Figure-2

Drop out rate at the secondary level in different states

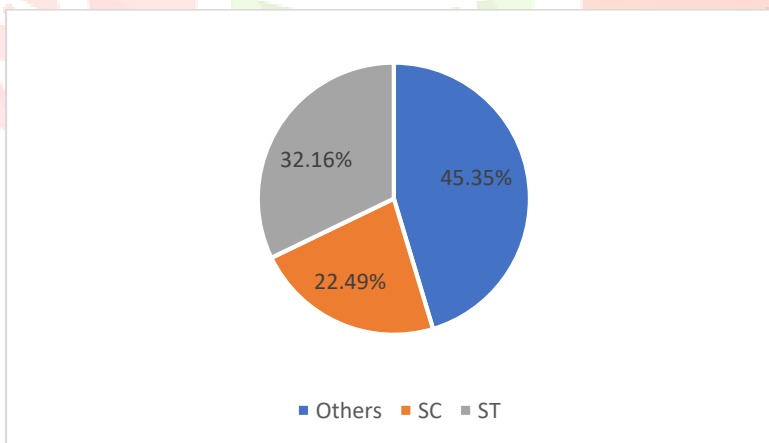


[source- udise+ dashboard 2019-20]

The figures presented above demonstrates that Odisha has a higher rate of dropouts at the secondary as compared to other Indian states because of the pandemic. The picture is even more disturbing where we find that drop out rate is even higher for the state of Odisha when compared to that of India. Most of the of students of Odisha haven't come back to school since the pandemic.

Figure-3

Dropout rate of schools in the pandemic-hit Odisha in the year 2020-21 in the secondary level



Source-[Indian Express]

Around 49,098 children dropped out of school in the pandemic-hit Odisha in the year 2020-21 in the secondary level. Out of this, 15,792(32.16%) students belong to tribal communities and 11,045(22.49 %) students from the Scheduled Caste (SC) category. The data presented above demonstrate that there is an extremely high rate of dropouts among tribal students in the secondary level in the year 2020-21.

Table-1

DROPOUT RATE IN SECONDARY LEVEL 2020-21, ODISHA			
SL NO.	WORST HIT DISTRICTS	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	DROPOUT
1.	KALAHANDI	6,731	
2.	KORAPUT	3,577	
3.	GANJAM	2,350	
4.	BHADRAK	1,822	
5.	KHURDA	1,734	
6.	BALASORE	1,592	
7.	JAGATSINGPUR	1,364	
8.	PURI	1,255	
9.	ANUGUL	2,715	
10.	SUNDARGADH	3,426	
11.	BARGADH	2,679	
12.	NUAPADA	2,350	
13.	MALKANGIRI	2,020	
14.	KEONJHAR	2,011	

[Source-Indian Express]

According to the above table, Kalahandi District had highest rate of school dropouts (6,731), followed by Koraput (3,577). Dropout rates per district were as follows: 2,363 in Ganjam, 1,822 in Bhadrak, 1,734 in Khurda, 1,592 in Balasore, 1,364 in Jagatsinghpur, 1,255 in Puri. There were 2,715 students from Anugul and 3,426 from Sundargarh. 2,679 students are from Bargarh, 2,350 from Nuapada. A total of 2,020 students in Malkangiri and 2,011 students in Keonjhar left their studies in the midst of the year. It is clear from the preceding statistics that the highest reported dropout rates are found in the southern districts of Odisha.

Table-2

The percentage of students having smartphones during the covid-t19 pandemic in 2020 in different district in Odisha

SL NO.	DISTRICT NAME	PERCENTAGE (%) OF STUDENTS HAVING SMARTPHONE
1	ANUGUL	23.43
2	BALASORE	36.00
3	BARAGARH	41.22
4	BHADRAK	32.78
5	BOLANGIR	26.09
6	BOUDH	18.61
7	CUTTACK	37.60
8	DEOGARH	14.87
9	DHENKANAL	31.44
10	GAJAPATI	15.34
11	GANJAM	29.35
12	JAGATSINGPUR	38.95
13	JAJPUR	31.27
14	JHARSUGUDA	43.18
15	KALAHANDI	24.00
16	KANDHAMAL	13.38
17	KENDRAPARA	42.27
18	KEONJHAR	21.67
19	KHURDHA	45.80
20	KORAPUT	17.87
21	MALKANGIRI	16.22
22	MAYURBHANJ	21.32

23	NABARANGPUR	18.03
24	NALAGARH	33.24
25	NUAPADA	21.75
26	PURI	35.83
27	RAYAGADA	14.34
28	SAMBALPUR	24.02
29	SONEPUR	29.87
30	SUNDARGARDH	28.89
	TOTAL	28.87

[Source-survey report by Sikhya sanjog]

As per the survey conducted by the Shikhya Sanjog program, the percentage of students having smartphones during the covid-19 pandemic in 2020 in different districts of Odisha, only about 29% of students had access to smartphones, which become a need for all students to continue their education during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Due to the deadly virus that began wreaking havoc in February 2020, the educational system was effectively shut down for over two years. Districts like Kandhamal (13.38%), Rayagada (14.34%), and Deogarh (14.87%) appear to have suffered the most, with over 71% of students in Odisha lacking access to smartphones for different reasons. During the 2020 year of COVID-19, Khurda, which includes the state's capital Bhubaneswar, saw the largest percentage of students who had access to smartphones (45.80%). Jharsuguda (43.18%) and Kendrapada (42.27%) were the next two places after Khurda¹⁹.

The school and mass education department even started teaching through Door darshan, YouTube, and radio for maximum reach. Only 33.52 percent of all students could be reached through YouTube, and only 22.46 percent of students watched courses on Doordarshan as part of the Shiksha Darpan program. Moreover, just nine percent of kids attended the radio path Shala for grades I- VIII. Only 15.92 lakh, 36.42 percent, of the 43.72 lakh primary school children (Lessons I -8) watched live YouTube classes when school remained closed. At the secondary level, just 33.52 percent of students attended live YouTube lessons. 20.10% of students at the primary level and 24.8% of students at the secondary level watched the Doordarshan show Shiksha Darpan. 9.47 percent of students were present at the radio pathshala. A bit more than 4 lakh primary students attended radio lessons during the previous school year, out of 43.72 lakh¹⁶.

The major reasons for rising dropout in Odisha

As stated in the report, a number of reasons have contributed to the state of Odisha's rising dropout rate. The lack of access to the Internet, the difficulty to afford for smartphones, and the allure of students to migrate in order to make short-term money are among the most common reasons for school dropouts.

In addition, the uncertain financial situation of parents as a direct result of the pandemic's impact has been identified as one of the primary reasons why children are leaving school midway. Five tribal teenagers who had dropped out of school to support their families by working in a shrimp processing plant in the Andhra Pradesh district of Guntur were killed in a fire in August of 2021, revealing the harsh reality of the growing number of school dropouts in Odisha during the COVID-19 pandemic. The great majority of children under the age of 18 moved to Andhra Pradesh to find employment in the shrimp processing businesses there. In the southern districts of Odisha, such as Koraput, Malkangiri, Gajapati, Rayagada, Ganjam, and Nabarangpur, there have been reports of students abandoning their schooling. According to the authorities approximately 50,000 students from Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities are thought to have dropped out⁵.

Steps taken by Odisha government to check the dropout rate: Post pandemic

In 2020-21 more than 43,000 students skipped matriculation exams, which promoted outrage from many sides. After that, a five-point plan was proposed to get these students back in the classroom. Teachers are directed to go door-to-door and talk to parents and students which it part of the program. Parental encouragement was the goal of the campaign. The District Education Officers (DEOs) and the PD DRDAs have been instructed to execute various programs under the Samagra Sikshya Abhiyan in an effort to reintegrate dropouts into educational institutions. Odisha government plans to upgrade 100 high schools to higher secondary schools from the next academic session to curb the dropout rate in Odisha, because many schools do not provide Plus II or there are no nearby universities, students frequently discontinue after matriculation. The inclusion of Plus II in higher secondary schools will also encourage female students²⁰.

School Sanjog Program: On-wheels Education for Tribal Communities an innovative programme of mobile classrooms in vans for young children from Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) villages in the state was launched in bhubaneswar on 27th october. The initiative known as the "School Sanjog Program" is a collaboration between Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti, Siksha Sandhan, UNICEF, and the Odisha SC ST Development Department. It focuses on continuous learning among children in PVTG (Poor and Vulnerable Tribal Groups) regions as an option to addressing the interruption in education among children in classes I through V during the phase of school closures caused by COVID-19. The pandemic prompted the transition from classroom to online schooling. Due to a lack of access to smart

phones and the internet, this prevented many children in PVTG regions from receiving an education. The Mobile School Initiative reaches out to students in PVTG areas in an effort to preserve learning continuity and reduce dropouts. The School Sanjog Program features a customized "Mobile School in a Van" that is visually appealing and packed with child-friendly learning resources, including audio-visual technology, books for children in Classes I - V, science kits, sports kits, and hygiene instruction kits. This will guarantee that children participate in enjoyable and memorable learning activities in the presence of qualified volunteers in an open environment, adhering to all Covid safety regulations and requirements provided by the State Government. These sessions would run two hours each. The objective of the School Sanjog Program "MOBILE SCHOOL IN A VAN" is to reach approximately 40,000 children from Classes I - V from PVTG communities in ten districts of Odisha (Keonjhar, Jajpur, Mayurbhanj, Angul, Gajapati, Rayagada, Kalahandi, Malkangiri, Kandhamal, and Gandhamal) and approximately 1,000 villages²¹.

Suggestion

To stop more students from dropping out and guarantee that every student, especially those from disadvantaged groups, girls, children from tribal communities, children from minority or migrant groups, etc., obtain a quality education, With the help of the local community, social activists, and Anganwadi workers, the government should spread awareness among the students and their parents in the vulnerable regions. Relationships between the student and the educator must be created in order to foster a productive learning environment. The government should investigate the financial barrier that compels students to abandon their studies midway. Government should create an interesting way of teaching in elementary and secondary education that prevents students from entering boredom and ensures that they receive the necessary counseling in school. In the end, it is up to us as a society to guarantee that all children have access to quality education. Every stakeholder, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), curriculum developers, and civil society organizations (CSOs), must play an active role in supporting government implementation and ensuring that the sector's vulnerabilities are addressed through constructive conversation and advocacy. In addition, the government should actively encourage businesses to participate in education-related CSR activities, such as the adoption of schools and the provision of technical support such as laptops and mobile phones, which are not facilitated by the government. To help bridge the digital divide, businesses can encourage employees to act as mentors to schools and students.

Conclusion

Odisha has a greater percentage of secondary school dropouts compared to other Indian states due to the epidemic, as revealed by the aforementioned study, which enabled us to gain a better understanding of the numerous causes contributing to the state's dropout rate. The majority of Odisha's students have not returned to school since the pandemic. The study reveals that there is an extremely high rate of secondary school dropouts among tribal students in 2020-21, as compared to other students. The majority of students had no access to smartphones, which became a requirement for all students to continue their education during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. A number of factors have contributed to Odisha's rising dropout rate. The absence of an Internet connection, the inability to acquire smartphones, and the pressure for students to relocate in order to earn short-term cash are among the most prevalent causes of school dropouts.

Declaration By Author

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