Education among Dongria Kondh Youth in Niyamgiri Hills: Status and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The Dongria Kondh, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) living in Odisha's Niyamgiri Hills, face significant hurdles in accessing and succeeding in the formal education system. This report synthesises current scholarly evidence to assess the educational status and primary challenges confronting Dongria Kondh youth. Findings indicate that while government initiatives such as Multilingual Education (MLE) and the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aim to improve outcomes, profound barriers remain. Key challenges include linguistic misalignment between the Kui mother tongue and the state-mandated medium of instruction, poor school infrastructure, and the socioeconomic necessity for youth to contribute to household and agricultural labour. Furthermore, the community's ongoing resistance against industrial encroachment and the transition from forest-based livelihoods to market economies create a complex socio-cultural environment that impacts youth development. The report concludes that while progress is being made through specialised programs, a more integrated approach that respects traditional ecological knowledge and addresses systemic infrastructure gaps is essential for sustainable educational empowerment.

Keywords: Dongria Kondh, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), Tribal Education, Niyamgiri Hills, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Dongria Kondh are an indigenous community living primarily in the Niyamgiri Hills of the Rayagada and Kalahandi districts in Odisha, India. Classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), they possess a unique socio-cultural identity deeply rooted in the Niyamgiri landscape, which they consider sacred [6, 11]. Historically, their development has been characterised by a struggle to balance traditional forest-based livelihoods with the encroaching demands of modern capitalism and industrialisation [10, 13]. In this context, education is viewed as both a tool for empowerment and a potential threat to cultural preservation. The transition to formal schooling for Dongria Kondh youth is fraught with complexities, ranging from basic accessibility issues to deep-seated pedagogical misalignments with their indigenous knowledge systems [15, 20]. This report examines the current state of education for this community, highlighting the persistent challenges that hinder youth development and the policy frameworks intended to address these disparities.

Their society is characterised by a close relationship with the natural environment, where agriculture, horticulture, and the sustainable use of forest resources form the basis of daily life. Indigenous knowledge, customary institutions, and spiritual beliefs associated with Niyam Raja shape their social and cultural identity. The Kui language remains the principal medium of communication within the community and serves as an important marker of their cultural heritage. Although various tribal welfare programmes have been implemented over the past few decades, the geographical isolation of many Dongria Kondh villages, coupled with limited access to infrastructure and public services, continues to constrain educational opportunities. As a

result, educational attainment among the community remains lower than that of many other population groups in Odisha, highlighting the need for context-sensitive educational interventions.

1.1 Importance of Education for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)

Education is a key driver of human development and social justice, particularly for indigenous communities experiencing long-standing socio-economic disadvantages. For PVTGs such as the Dongria Kondh, education contributes not only to literacy and livelihood opportunities but also to improved health, informed decision-making, gender equality, and participation in democratic institutions. Equally important is the role of education in preserving indigenous languages, cultural traditions, and local knowledge systems. Contemporary educational policies increasingly recognise that quality education for tribal communities should be culturally responsive rather than culturally assimilative. In this regard, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates inclusive education, mother-tongue-based instruction during the early years, multilingual learning, and targeted support for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) [7, 15]. These policy directions provide important opportunities for improving educational participation while respecting the cultural identity of the Dongria Kondh community.

1.2 Educational Scenario in Odisha and the Rayagada Region

Odisha is home to one of the largest tribal populations in India, with many communities residing in remote hilly and forested landscapes. Within this broader context, the Rayagada and Kalahandi districts represent areas where educational development is shaped by challenging geographical and socio-economic conditions. Government initiatives, including Ashram schools, Eklavya Model Residential Schools, scholarship programmes, Samagra Shiksha, and school nutrition schemes, have expanded educational access over the years. Nevertheless, disparities in educational participation persist, particularly among PVTGs living in inaccessible settlements. Factors such as inadequate transportation, insufficient school infrastructure, teacher shortages, language differences between home and school, and household poverty continue to influence school attendance, retention, and learning achievement. Consequently, educational outcomes among the Dongria Kondh remain below desired levels despite sustained policy efforts [27,28].

Objectives of the Study

1. Examine the present status of education among Dongria Kondh youth in the Niyamgiri Hills
2. Identify the major challenges affecting access, retention, and quality of education
3. Analyse the roles of state policies and educational institutions in addressing tribal educational marginalisation

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Approach and Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods, descriptive and analytical research orientation. Quantitative and qualitative evidence are used to examine educational status, educational challenges and policy responses concerning Dongria Kondh youth. The design is intended to provide both an overview of educational participation and an interpretive understanding of the socio-cultural conditions surrounding schooling.

2.2 Study Area

The study focuses on Dongria Kondh-inhabited areas of the Niyamgiri Hills, particularly in Rayagada district. The original document identifies three blocks, Bissamcuttack, Muniguda and Kalyansingpur, as the principal areas considered for the study. These locations were selected because of their distinctive geographical, socio-cultural, linguistic and educational characteristics.

2.3 Population and Sample

The study population comprises Dongria Kondh youth/students and parents. The original methodology specifies the use of multistage sampling for students. Because the source document does not provide a complete numerical description of the final sample in the methodology section, no additional sample figure is introduced here.

2.4 Sources of Data

The study draws on primary and secondary sources. Secondary evidence includes scholarly literature, policy documents and published material concerning tribal education, PVTGs, Dongria Kondh society and educational interventions. The original document also incorporates educational-status information and evidence from literature concerning institutional and socio-economic challenges.

2.5 Analytical Strategy

Quantitative information is presented descriptively through counts, percentages and comparative educational indicators where available in the source material. Qualitative evidence is organised thematically around language and pedagogy, infrastructure and institutions, socio-economic conditions, gender, livelihood transformation and policy responses.

3. CURRENT STATUS OF EDUCATION AMONG DONGRIA KONDH YOUTH

The educational landscape for the Dongria Kondh is marked by significant disparities in enrolment, retention, and achievement [4]. While overall literacy rates in Odisha have improved over several decades, PVTGs like the Dongria Kondh continue to lag behind the state and national averages [24]. Enrolment in primary education has increased due to government outreach, yet retention remains a critical issue, particularly as students transition to higher levels of schooling [4, 21]. Gendered dimensions are also prominent; adolescent girls face specific health and hygiene challenges that intersect with their schooling. Research indicates that while government schemes provide sanitary napkins through schools and local health centres, the broader support systems for female students are often insufficient to prevent dropouts during puberty [1]. Furthermore, youth within the community have expressed significant dissatisfaction regarding their perceived lack of opportunities for both formal education and sustainable employment [3].

3.1 Higher Educational Status

Educational Category	Number	Percentage	Observation
UG Completed	27	38.00%	Largest reported group
UG Continuing	23	32.40%	Second-largest group
PG Completed	9	12.70%	Limited postgraduate progression
Professional Courses Completed	9	12.70%	Participation in professional education
PG Continuing	2	2.80%	Small proportion
Ph.D. Continuing	1	1.40%	Very limited doctoral participation

The reported pattern suggests that higher education participation extends beyond undergraduate study for a proportion of Dongria Kondh youth, but progression to postgraduate and doctoral levels remains comparatively limited. The gender pattern reported in the source indicates greater male representation in undergraduate education and professional courses, while females are more represented among postgraduate-completed respondents.

According to the table data indicate that UG completed students constitute the largest group (27; 38.0%), followed by UG continuing students (23; 32.4%). PG completed students and students who completed profe-

ssional courses each account for 9 (12.7%), while PG continuing students constitute 2 (2.8%). Only 1 respondent (1.4%) is continuing Ph.D. education. Gender-wise, males are more represented in UG education and professional courses, whereas females are more represented among PG-completed students. This pattern suggests that although participation in higher education extends beyond undergraduate study, the number progressing to postgraduate and doctoral levels remains comparatively limited.

3.2 Educational Participation Across Selected Localities

Block	Panchayat	Boys	Girls	Block	Panchayat	Boys/Girls
Bissamcuttack	Kurli	19	17	Muniguda	Munikhol	2-Feb
Bissamcuttack	Chanchraguda	0	0	Muniguda	Sibapadar	0 / 0
Bissamcuttack	Daliakuji	1	—	Kalyansingpur	Parsali	6-Feb
				Kalyansingpur	Sunakhandi	2-Jan

The locality-level figures reproduced above are retained from the source document. Because the original table is partially fragmented in the extracted document, the values should be checked against the original field dataset before journal submission.

4. MAJOR EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

The educational challenges identified in the study are multidimensional and mutually reinforcing. Poverty and geographical isolation restrict access to schooling and learning resources; language differences affect classroom comprehension; teacher shortages and inadequate infrastructure weaken institutional quality; and the digital divide limits access to contemporary learning opportunities. Gender-related barriers and seasonal livelihood activities further influence continuity.

Challenge	Reported Severity	Interpretation
Poverty	5 - Highest	Household economic pressures can affect attendance and continuation.
Difficult terrain / geographical isolation	5 - Highest	Distance and transport difficulties constrain regular attendance.
Digital divide	5 - Highest	Limited connectivity and digital access restrict learning opportunities.
Language barrier	High /Second-ranked	Mismatch between home language and school language can hinder comprehension.
Teacher shortage	High / Second-ranked	Insufficient teachers reduce instructional quality and continuity.
School infrastructure	High / Second-ranked	Inadequate facilities affect the learning environment.
Gender issues	Third-ranked	Girls face specific schooling, health and social barriers.
Seasonal livelihood activities	Third-ranked	Agricultural and forest-based work can interrupt schooling.

4.1 Linguistic and Pedagogical Barriers

One of the most profound obstacles to educational success for Dongria Kondh children is the linguistic divide. The primary medium of instruction in government schools is typically Odia or English, which differs

significantly from Kui, the mother tongue of the Dongria Kondh [2]. This language barrier acts as a significant deterrent to learning, often leading to alienation and poor academic performance in the early years of schooling [2, 15]. The loss of traditional knowledge systems is also a concern when modern education fails to incorporate indigenous perspectives. The transition from forest-based learning to a classroom-centric model can lead to a weakening of traditional ecological knowledge, which is vital for the community's survival in the Niyamgiri Hills [9, 12]. Efforts to address this through Multilingual Education n(MLE)programs have been initiated in Odisha to bridge the gap between the mother tongue and the official language, specifically targeting Dongria Kondh girls' schooling [7]. However, the implementation of these programs remains inconsistent across the remote hilly terrains.

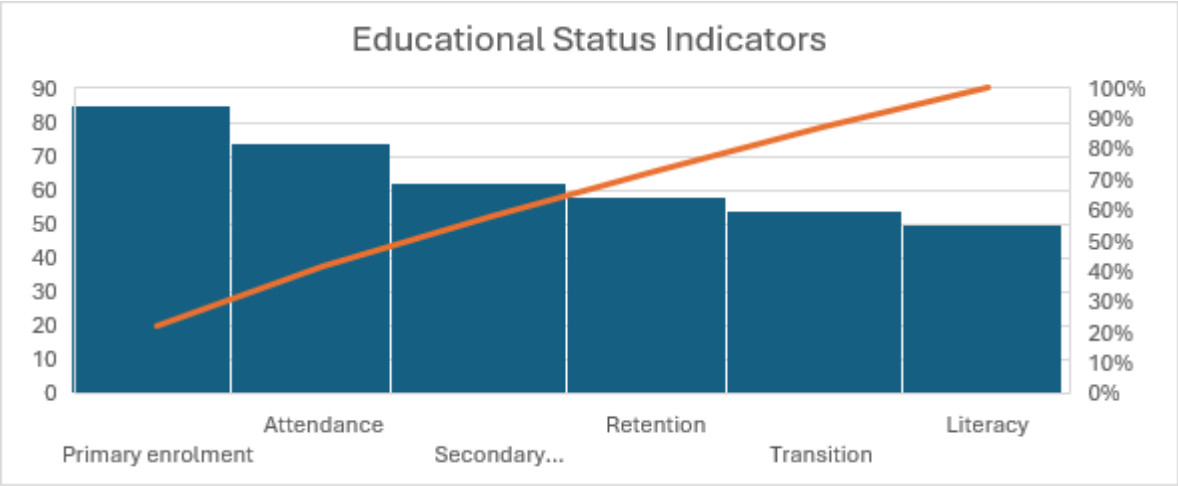
The issue is consistent with the multilingual orientation of NEP 2020. The policy recommends that, wherever possible, the medium of instruction in the foundational years should be the home language, mother tongue, local language or regional language and encourages bilingual learning materials.

4.2 Infrastructure and Institutional Challenges

The physical and institutional environment of schools in tribal areas significantly impacts student outcomes. Many schools in the Rayagada district are characterised by poor infrastructure and a lack of basic facilities [17]. Specific institutional barriers identified in similar PVTG contexts include:

- **Single-Teacher Schools:** Many remote schools operate with only one teacher, which severely compromises the quality of instruction and classroom management [21].
- **Teacher Demographics:** The prevalence of male teachers in day schools has been noted as a potential barrier for tribal girls, who may feel less comfortable in such environments.
- **Distance and Accessibility:** The rugged terrain of the Niyamgiri Hills makes commuting to school difficult, especially during the monsoon season. The lack of reliable transportation often leads to irregular attendance and eventual dropout [16,21].

4.3 Educational Status Indicators of Dongria Kondha Youth



Highlights the educational status of Dongria Kondha youth, indicating improvements in school enrolment and access through government initiatives. However, significant challenges remain, including low secondary enrolment, irregular attendance, high dropout rates, language barriers, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and socio-economic constraints. Educational incentives such as scholarships, hostels, and free learning materials have enhanced participation but require more effective implementation. Although girls' education has improved, gender-related barriers still exist. Overall, the findings suggest that while educational progress has been made, substantial gaps persist. Strengthening multilingual education, improving school facilities, enhancing teacher availability, encouraging community participation, and effectively implementing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 are essential for improving educational outcomes among Dongria

Kondh youth.

5. GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

5.1 Multilingual Education

Multilingual Education (MLE) is particularly relevant to Dongria Kondh learners because it can reduce the gap between the language of the home and the language of schooling. The original study identifies MLE initiatives in Odisha as an important response, while also noting uneven implementation in remote areas.

5.2 National Education Policy 2020

NEP 2020 places equity, inclusion and multilingualism at the centre of educational reform. For tribal learners, the Ministry of Education identifies benefits related to inclusion, language, access and educational opportunity. The policy's language provisions are especially significant because they recognise the educational value of learning through languages familiar to children and communities.

5.3 Residential and Institutional Support

Ashram schools, residential schools, Eklavya Model Residential Schools, scholarships and other welfare interventions are intended to reduce economic and geographical barriers. However, the effectiveness of these interventions depends on teacher availability, infrastructure, culturally appropriate pedagogy, student support and meaningful community engagement.

5.4 Tribal Sub-Plan and Related Welfare Measures

The original paper identifies the Tribal Sub-Plan as an important policy mechanism for addressing infrastructure and socio-economic needs, while noting that implementation bottlenecks can reduce its effectiveness at the grassroots level.

6. SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL INTERSECTIONS

Education for the Dongria Kondh cannot be divorced from their socio-economic realities. Poverty and the necessity for children to contribute to the family economy remain primary drivers of school absenteeism [21]. Youth are frequently required to assist with household chores or agricultural activities, particularly during the harvest season for swidden cultivation and agroforestry [8].

Health and nutrition also play a critical role in educational attainment. Studies on PVTGs in Odisha, including the Dongria Kondh, have revealed alarmingly high rates of undernutrition and anaemia [26]. Among children and adolescents (5–19 years), the prevalence of thinness is significant, and severe anaemia is common among reproductive-age women. These health deficiencies directly impact cognitive development and the ability of students to maintain the physical stamina required for formal schooling.

7. LIVELIHOOD TRANSFORMATION AND YOUTH RESISTANCE

The youth of the Niyamgiri Hills are coming of age during a period of intense social and environmental conflict. The community's resistance against bauxite mining and large-scale industrial projects has shaped the worldview of the younger generation [11,14]. This movement for environmental justice and the preservation of the sacred Niyamgiri Hills often prioritises indigenous identity and traditional land rights over conventional developmental models [3, 6]. The shift from subsistence forest gathering and shifting cultivation to market-based livelihoods has introduced new challenges [9]. While agroforestry is being promoted as a sustainable development model to enhance resilience, it requires a different set of skills than those traditionally taught in formal schools [5, 8]. The tension between preserving cultural roots and achieving economic integration through modern education remains a central theme in the lives of Dongria Kondh youth [9,18].

8. GOVERNMENT POLICY AND STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

Several policy frameworks have been developed to address the educational marginalisation of tribal communities in Odisha:

- **Multilingual Education (MLE):** This program aims to use the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in early grades to improve comprehension and retention [7, 15].
- **New Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** The NEP emphasises inclusion, equity, and the right to education for indigenous children, proposing strategies to integrate tribal languages and knowledge into the curriculum [7,19].
- **Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP):** Implementation of the TSP in Odisha focuses on improving infrastructure and economic security, though bottlenecks in its execution often limit its effectiveness at the grassroots level [25].
- **Residential Schooling:** The establishment of residential schools (Ashram schools) has been a primary strategy to overcome distance barriers and provide a stable learning environment for PVTG students [21].

9. LIMITATIONS OF THE EVIDENCE

While there is a growing body of literature on tribal education in Odisha, specific data on Dongria Kondh youth in Niyamgiri remain fragmented. Much of the available research focuses on PVTGs as a collective group, which may obscure the unique challenges faced by the Dongria Kondh [4, 21]. Furthermore, longitudinal studies that track the long-term impacts of MLE and residential schooling on Dongria Kondh employment and social mobility are lacking. The reliance on metadata in some anthropological accounts also means that specific quantitative indicators like precise literacy rates and grade-specific dropout numbers for the Niyamgiri region are not always readily available in the scholarly record.

10. RESEARCH GAPS

Several areas require further investigation to better support the educational needs of Dongria Kondh youth:

- **Impact of Resistance Movements on Schooling:** More research is needed to understand how the Niyamgiri resistance movement affects school attendance and the perceived value of formal education among youth.
- **Integration of Traditional Ecological Knowledge:** Studies should explore how formal curricula can be adapted to include traditional agroforestry and ecological practices without compromising academic standards.
- **Digital Divide:** The extent of digital literacy and access to technology among Dongria Kondh youth, especially in the context of the digital era's demands on higher education, remains under-explored [22].
- **Mental Health and Well-being:** The psychological impact of displacement and socio-economic marginalisation on tribal youth requires more focused bibliometric and clinical analysis [23].

11. CONCLUSION

Education among Dongria Kondh youth in the Niyamgiri Hills is at a crossroads. While policy shifts toward multilingual and inclusive education offer promising pathways, the structural barriers of linguistic alienation, poor infrastructure, and socio-economic pressures persist. The resilience of the Dongria Kondh community and their deep connection to the Niyamgiri landscape suggest that educational models must be culturally responsive and ecologically grounded to be truly effective. Addressing the health and nutritional needs of the youth, alongside infrastructure improvements and the meaningful implementation of mother-tongue-based instruction, remains essential for bridging the gap between traditional identity and modern opportunity.

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