

AN OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM AMONG STUDENTS OF THE PANIYA TRIBES IN MANATHAVADY PANCHAYAT OF WAYANAD DISTRICT, KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Education is essential for any society to enable its people to take their due place in its social, economical and cultural life. Education aims to help develop insights and skills so as to enable people to deal effectively with their problems (Sahu, 2001). Tribes have always been considered down trodden communities, and tribals perceived as secondary citizens due to contributory factors such as illiteracy and ignorance. The Paniya community in Wayanad is the most downtrodden tribe of all. The tribal populace is unaware of the importance of education and, consequently, do not encourage their children to complete their education and this has led to considerable numbers of young people dropping out of school and, in addition, large-scale absenteeism. The present study on absenteeism among Paniya students is aimed at examining the reasons for absenteeism among the said students and the attitude of the parents, in general, towards education. The economic backwardness of the tribes in the area was considered a major drawback, and a host of welfare programmes were implemented by the Government of Kerala for their betterment. It was observed that several factors accounted for the high rate of absenteeism in schools, and not merely the lack of financial security on the home front. Deprivation was a major factor that led to tribal students dropping out of school early on and begins working alongside their parents in right earnest. Contributory factors also included a lack of general awareness, indifference to the benefits of a general education, laziness, poor health, and the considerable difficulty involved in commuting long distances over inhospitable terrain." This paper also identifies the pitfalls that authorities at school are expected to deal with in order to prevent absenteeism among tribal students.

Key words: Absenteeism, Tribal education, Paniya students, Educational backwardness, Tribal absenteeism

Introduction

Tribals are “adivasis” or “original inhabitants,” the aboriginal people of the land. People were divided into various tribes prior to the introduction of the caste system. A tribe is a homogenous and self-contained unit without a hierarchical discrimination. India has the largest population of tribal people in the world, and these people have a social structure, culture and language quite different from the general Indian populace (Thakur, Devendra, & Thakur, 1994). They live in scattered, isolated areas that lack basic amenities such as communication, transportation, education and medical care (Menon, 2013). The Indian Constitution refers to these people as the “Scheduled Tribes,” and they collectively represent one of the most economically impoverished and marginalized groups in India. The tribals were always exploited, considered second-rate citizens, and deprived of privileges which the general population enjoys. Kerala consists of 37 Scheduled Tribes constituting 1.26% of the state's population. Among the Scheduled Tribes of Kerala, the Pulayans, Paniyans, Maratis, Malayarayars, Kurumans, Kurichiyans and Irulas exist in considerable numbers, while the Kadars, Cholanayikkars, Mudugars, Irulars, Pulayars and Kurumbas make up the rest. The Scheduled Tribe population in Wayanad district is 114969, which is 35.8% of the state's tribal population and 17.11 percent of the district's population (Census of India, 2001). Wayanad consists of the Paniya, Kurichyan, Adiyar, Kattunaikkar and Kuruma tribes. According to the Kerala Development Report (2008, p. 356), grinding poverty among the rural adivasis in Kerala persists, and is reckoned to be more than two-and-a-half times that of the rural population of Kerala in general. The level of education is directly related to income and wealth which, in turn, influence poverty.

Education, in a sense, is the sum of all the experiences through which a person or people come to acquire knowledge, instruction or training. It is a process of growth and development of the human personality and knowledge (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974). While the importance of education is universally recognized, it is essential that tribals not only acquire general literacy but also related skills which will equip them to

face the relentless onslaught of the exogenous forces of modernization (Sahu, 2001). Education is an important step in the process of empowerment, Empowerment, with reference to the tribal community, refers to equipping them to secure access to (and control of) their land, forest and water resources, as also helping them sustain and promote viable alternatives for the sake of a secure livelihood. Education is important for all tribals, and not because of a constitutional obligation but rather as a crucial point for their total development, especially when it comes to building confidence and dealing with outsiders on equal terms.

Tribals are not known for perseverance. They have no desire to wait for years to complete their formal education as they wish to make money effortlessly and quickly, therefore they lose no time in reverting to their traditional jobs. This has led to steadily rising numbers of school dropouts across tribes. The literacy rate among the tribes in Kerala is very low, with a low enrolment ratio and a high dropout ratio (Census, 2001). Kerala has a high literacy rate of 90.92% but it is only 64.5% in the case of Scheduled Tribes, which is far behind. A vast majority of the rural tribes in Kerala hail from the Paniya sect, traditionally an extremely regressive group, characterized by acute illiteracy and ignorance, combined with superstition. The Paniyas - who constitute the largest group of Kerala's illiterate and primitive tribes - , have been included in the list of Scheduled Tribes maintained by the unions of various state governments in India, namely Madras, Mysore and Kerala (Thurston, 1909).

80% of literates from the Paniya community have had a primary school education, whereas the Kurichyan (the second largest tribe) has 60% of its literates at the same level, and an additional 9.9% with a secondary school education (Census of India, 2001). The Paniyas speak their respective tribal mother tongues and, in addition, speak one or more regional languages like Tamil, Malayalam or Kannada (also of Dravidian stock). A study of the government residential hostel in Gudalur reveals that in the last 39 years of its history, only 5 tribal students completed high school, with many dropping out while still only in primary school (Pottala, 1996).

School absenteeism refers to: a child-motivated refusal to attend school, difficulty in attending classes, partial absence, skipping classes or missing part of a school day, chronic tardiness, sporadic or full-time school attendance marked by a substantial fear of going to school and, finally, pleasing parents so as to remain at home and not have to attend school (Uppal, Paul & Sreenivas, 2010). Absenteeism is the stage that precedes dropping out of school. Tribal students fail to attend school regularly, citing reasons such as difficulty in coping with lessons, discrimination by their peers, poor health, economic factors and a lack of transportation - to name a few - for not going to school. The Paniya community was found to be the most downtrodden tribal community of all. The widespread poverty of the Paniyas doesn't permit them to keep their homes clean: consequently the unhygienic environment and lack of nutritious food has made the children susceptible to various illnesses. As a direct result of their parents lacking the resources to afford proper medical treatment, children who are ill are forced stay back at home often, eventually culminating in their dispensing with schooling altogether Tribal parents, ignorant and largely unaware of the benefits of schooling, desist from consciously encouraging or supporting their children's education: unluckily, this has gone a long way in determining the negative attitude that Paniya students have of education in general. Hence a good number of Paniya students are either school dropouts, or are not regular at school. There are a number of studies on school dropouts among tribal students in India. This study, however, is confined to looking into the reasons behind school absenteeism, the preliminary stage that eventually culminates in students dropping out of school altogether. Hence the study attempts to discover both the reasons for school absenteeism among students from the Paniya tribal community, and the lack of parental support for education.

Review of Literature:

Ananda (1994), in his study of the Chenchu tribes in Nagamalai Hills, found that absenteeism in primary school is high because children accompany their parents in collecting non-timber products. Absenteeism in middle and high school results from early marriage,

children being engaged in tending to cattle, older children looking after their younger siblings, migration and students' own indifference to the pursuit of learning.

Shukla (2005) stated that preventing children from dropping out of schools is a serious challenge for the educational authorities. A general finding of her studies is that tribal children perform poorly in schools and demonstrate a lower level of achievement when compared to children of other culture groups.

Singh (2006) observed that school students from the S T communities encounter a series of problems leading to absenteeism from school (followed by dropping out of school altogether), including commuting a long distance to school in hostile environmental conditions, putting up with abuse and discrimination from teachers and fellow students from non-tribal backgrounds, experiencing difficulty in comprehending the language of instruction, and negotiating for themselves a space which history has denied them. Tribal children are often subjected to overt discrimination by non-tribal upper caste school teachers, who view them as slow learners. Since tribal languages are very distinct from the medium of instruction in schools, tribal children find it extremely difficult to cope with their general studies and homework.

Swamy (2010) stated that most Paniya parents prefer to bring their children's education to a halt with schooling at the primary level. It is noted that the Paniyas in the Vellamunda Panchayat of Manathavady Block have no interest whatsoever in attending high school. The study conducted among Paniya students reveals that 43% of the respondents are illiterates, 23% have had a primary school education, 32% a high school education, and 2% have completed Std X. Female education is still lagging behind because every woman member of the community becomes an earning member and, therefore, lends a hand in any economic pursuit worth its name. As soon as children in the Paniya community attain the age of six or seven, they begin to participate in the process of generating an income and assist in certain petty errands like fetching water, collecting wood for fuel and looking after infants at home. Boys find work as agricultural labourers.

Ota, Bara, & Patnaik (2010) found that in Orissa, most children belonging to the ST and SC categories drop out of school early due to rampant poverty. The author attributes the high incidence of dropouts, absenteeism and non-enrolment in school - as well as the engagement of children in household, agricultural and supplementary work - to the indifferent attitude of economically deprived parents to the benefits of modern education; difficulty in comprehending what is taught (as the medium of instruction at school is not their mother tongue) and, finally, the location of schools in an inhospitable terrain.

Sujatha (2010) found that due to an appalling lack of sanitary provisions, many tribal students studying in ashram schools are affected by contagious diseases like scabies and diarrhoea, leading to school absenteeism. Further, the rigid system of formal schooling - which emphasizes discipline as a routine norm, coupled with teacher-centered instruction - have led to students staying away from school.

Methodology

Objectives

1. To study the socio-demographic details of the respondents,
2. To analyze the various reasons for absenteeism among the respondents,
3. To examine the attitude of parents and their lack support towards the education of the respondents, and
4. To nurture talent and encourage interest and enthusiasm in co-curricular activities on the part of the respondents.

Research design and tools adopted

The study attempts to describe the reasons for school absenteeism among tribal students of the Paniya community in Manathavady Panchayat of Wayanad district. Absenteeism in this study refers to “not going to school with, or without, any reason by the Paniya tribal students of Manathavady Panchayat.” A descriptive research design was adopted for the study. Wayanad District comprises the three block Panchayats of Kalpetta, Manathavady and Sulthan Bathery.

Manathavady Panchayat in Manathavady Block consists of 40 Paniya tribal colonies with 931 tribal students. Of the 40 colonies, 5 colonies with the highest number of tribal students were selected for the study, and there is a total number of 201 students in these 5 colonies. Irrespective of the elements in each stratum, 10 elements were randomly selected from each stratum using disproportionate stratified random sampling, which constitutes a sample size of 50 Paniya tribal students - that is, 25% of the population studied. Multistage sampling was thus used for selecting the sample. The data was collected from the respondents through a self structured questionnaire. Since the study was limited solely to the Paniya community, the results drawn cannot be generalized to apply to Wayanad's other tribal communities.

Data analysis

Table 1

Distribution showing the respondents' opinion on the reasons for liking school

Reasons for liking school	N (50)	Percent of Cases
Like to be taught at school	34	68.0%
Good teachers and school atmosphere	30	60.0%
To spend time with friends	45	90.0%
To become disciplined	13	26.0%
To get midday meals	46	92.0%

Table 1 reveals that an overwhelming majority - that is, 92% - of the respondents state that they like school as they get midday meals, while 90 % state that they like school as they are interested in spending time with friends. More than two-thirds (68 %) of the respondents state that they like to be at school so as to learn something of value, with 60% saying that they like school because of good teachers and the conducive atmosphere therein.

Table 2

Distribution showing the respondents' opinion on reasons for absenteeism

Reasons for absenteeism	N 50	Percent of Cases
Poor health	15	30.0%
Lack of interest	25	50.0%
Long distance travel	38	76.0%
Fear of teachers	1	2.0%
Difficulty in picking up things	17	34.0%
Laziness	36	72.0%
No specific reason	3	6.0%

Table 2 shows that more than three-fourths of the respondents (76%) state that they often take leave and stay away from school as they are required to travel long distances from their homes. 72% of the respondents accept that they are often too lazy to go to school, whereas half (50%) state that they are not too interested in going to school. 30% of the respondents cite poor health as the major reason for absenteeism, while 34% say that difficulty in coping with what is taught is the major reason for bunking school. Only 2% of the respondents state that they are afraid of teachers (which leads to their taking leave often), while 6% state that they have no particular reason to stay away from school.

Table 3
Kruskalwallis H test between absenteeism at school and income status of respondents' parents

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Categories	N	Mean Rank	df	H value	P value
Absenteeism at school	Income of respondents' parents	Less than 100	2	11.00	2	4.319	0.115
		100-200	47	26.43			
		More than 200	1	11.00			
		Total	50				

Table 3 shows that the variance between respondents' absenteeism at school is based on the size of parental income earned. It is inferred that there is no significant difference between respondents' absenteeism at school and their parents' income ($H=4.319, P=0.115$). It is thus derived that the income of the parents does not affect the respondents' absenteeism at school.

Table 4
Mann Whitney U Test between gender and respondents' percentage of marks

	Gender of the respondents	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U Value	P Value
Percentage of marks	Male	36	27.06	974.00	196.00	.112
	Female	14	21.50	301.00		
	Total	50				

Table 4 shows the variance in the respondents' percentage of marks with regard to gender. It is found that there is no significant difference between gender and the respondents' percentage of marks ($U \text{ Value}=196, P=0.112>0.05$). Thus it is derived that the respondents' gender does not affect the percentage of marks scored by them.

Table 5
Association between the respondents' gender and absenteeism due to illness

Gender of the respondents	Attributes	Absenteeism due to illness		Total	df	P Value
		Yes	No			
	Male	15	21	36	1	0.151
	Female	9	5	14		
Total		24	26	50		

Table 5 shows the association between the gender of the respondents and absenteeism due to illness. It is inferred that there is no association between gender and absenteeism at school.

Table 6
Association between distance travelled by the respondents to school and regularity of attendance

	Attributes	Regularity of attendance at school			Total	Df	P value
		Always	A few days	Rarely			
Distance to school	Less than 1 km	0	3	0	3	4	.631
	1-3 kms	0	9	3	12		
	More than 3 kms	3	23	9	35		
	Total	3	35	12	50		

Table 6 shows the association between the distance travelled by the students to school and the regularity of their attendance. It is inferred that there is no association between the two.

Findings and Discussions

The study was conducted among 50 tribal students of the Paniya tribal community. The results showed diverse reasons for school absenteeism, proficiency in skills quite apart from the conventional, the aptitude of these students and the attitude of tribal parents, in general, towards education.

Socio-economic conditions and absenteeism

It was found that 88% of the students' parents were coolies or daily-wage workers, and 94% earned a sum of Rs 100-200 daily. The adivasis constitute 3% of the total BPL population, while their proportion to the total population is only 1.14 per cent (The Economic Review, 2009). As indicated by Thurston (1909), "Paniyans," - a term used to refer to "workers" - were agricultural laborers "bought" by the upper castes during the medieval ages. The declining dependence on agriculture, combined with the use of new technology, has rendered them unemployable.. Thus, the Paniyas - said to be the most downtrodden community of all - live in pitiable economic conditions. It was observed that 42% of the students stated that the family's economic hardships were the major reason for their staying out of school.

Lack of proper transportation facilities

The Paniya tribes live in tribal colonies which are isolated from the main towns. The study reveals that 70% of students travel more than 5 kilometers, and are often compelled to walk to school because of the grossly inadequate transportation facilities connecting their colonies and schools. More than two-thirds (68%) of the students declared that the lack of transportation affected their regular attendance at school.

Health issues

Kerala's Education Report reveals that students of ashram schools suffer from contagious diseases like scabies and diarrhoea due to a lack of sanitary facilities, and this has led to their staying away from school (Sujatha, 2010). However, while this study shows that only 5% of all students have no access to proper sanitation facilities, 48% stated that illness led to irregular attendance, on their part, at school. Joy & Srihari (2014) stated that many tribal students who had dropped out of school pointed out that they had not been given proper medical care while ill.

Academic problems

Despite the great strides made in terms of achievements in Kerala's educational system - with special reference to the Kerala model of development - tribals across Kerala have fared poorly in the domain of

educational achievements. Tribal students have a lot of problems when it comes to academic performance. Shukla (2005) stated that tribal children perform poorly in schools and demonstrate lower levels of achievement in comparison with children from other cultural groups. Of the Paniya students in Manathavady Panchayat, 56% of the respondents showed very little interest in general studies. The study also looked into the academic performance of the respondents in the previous exams, which revealed that 74% of the tribal students had scored marks below 40%.

The Paniya tribes speak a colloquial language which is a blend of Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada. The medium of instruction at ashram schools, consequently, was a major hurdle that these unfortunate students had to deal with - to try to comprehend what their teachers were teaching them in the local language. It was noted that 86% of Paniya students declared that problems with language had affected their academic performance. Sahu (2001) is of the opinion that in much of India, the medium of instruction is largely Hindi, which tribal students in primary school are entirely unfamiliar with. More than half the students in this study (53%) hold the view that academic failure is no reason for absenteeism.

The approach of teachers & parents

As a general rule, teachers do not make much of an effort to work at raising the educational standard of tribal students. A lack of communication, consistently high levels of absenteeism in class, poor results in tests and examinations, and the lack of attention in class on the part of these students are certain factors that have contributed to the increasingly indifferent attitude of the teachers concerned towards tribal students. (Haseena, 2014) Disparately, though, teachers in Manathavady Panchayat had, at least, made an attempt to look into the reasons for student absenteeism. The majority of tribal students (86%) state that teachers do visit their homes when they are persistently absent from school, while a heart-warming majority (96%) state that their teachers show them no discrimination on the basis of their caste or community - quite unlike the rampant discrimination reported in many schools in north India.

Alcohol consumption in India is disproportionately higher among the poorer and socially marginalized groups, notably the Scheduled Tribes (STs), when compared to the general populace. Alcoholism is viewed as a major problem among the Paniyas, with students' parents consuming alcohol in large quantities and regular resorting to tobacco use. These children are exposed to conflicts at home on a regular basis, and the atmosphere therein is hardly conducive to peace and harmony, with their fathers coming home drunk every evening. The resultant brawling and ugliness lead to emotional distress and a complete lack of interest in education. A constructive environment to study in is not provided at home. More than half the students (60%) state that their parents' alcoholism affects their studies.

The fact that the parents themselves are illiterate and scarcely aware of the importance of education has a bearing on the fact that the said parents do not actively encourage their children to pursue an education: on the contrary, they persuade them instead to engage in some form of work so as to contribute to increased monetary pickings at home. The study reveals that more than half of the respondents' parents do not attend PTA meetings, although an encouraging 56% have shown a positive attitude towards their children's education by motivating them to continue to go to school.

Negative attitude towards schooling

Tribal students are largely unaware of the far-reaching benefits of education, and consider it something of a bore. Although they are clearly aware that the government's generous monetary allowances are intended to help them continue with their education, the prevailing negative attitude towards education in general constrains them to stay back at home rather than put in an appearance at school (Joy & Srihari, 2014). This study shows that 88% of the respondents are aware of the scholarships made available for their benefit, and 56% bold enough to say that they go to school only in order to receiving the funding.

Tribal students prefer hanging out in groups, bunking classes en masse so as to play in the outdoors, wander around in the woods and swim in the river. Peer group pressure is an important factor responsible for

large-scale absenteeism, with a little more than half the respondents (56%) stating that it is their friends who influence them to stay away from school.

Factors encouraging attendance at school

The study revealed that 70% of all students go to school for only a few days, resulting in a marked shortage of attendance. The study attempted to find out if there exist factors that motivate these students to attend school at all. It was discovered that acute poverty deters tribal households from putting nutritious food on the table, and this has led to frequent illness among the children. Not surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of students (92%) stated that the mid-day meal served at school is the single most important factor that motivates them to continue turning up at school. It was also found that 90 % are interested in going to school so as to enjoy the company of their friends.

Tribal students and their distinctive skills

This piece of research focused on examining whether Paniya tribal students were at all interested in co-curricular activities, apart from the regular education that was being imparted to them. It was found that the majority of tribal students (76%) preferred to participate more in sports than in any other programme, while 60% regularly participated in sports. Evidently, most are gifted when it comes to cultural activities and sports. Unfortunately, regular absenteeism has disqualified them from taking part in from different competitions at school; consequently, they have been unable to do justice to their talents and skills. It is precisely these very skills and talents that need to be augmented in order to help tribal students integrate seamlessly into mainstream society.

“Kanavu,” a non-formal educational system founded by K J Baby in 1990, aimed at bringing tribal students into mainstream society. Tribal students were found to be brilliant stage performers but most, unfortunately, lacked even a rudimentary primary education. “Kanavu” is an alternative school for the tribal community, and it went

on to become a successful model in educating the tribals, even as it sought to preserve their skills and traditions. It attempted to reaffirm the individuality of the tribe while simultaneously imparting a sense of self-worth and self-esteem to tribal children through a unique educational process. Apart from education, “Kanavu” promotes and showcases the distinctive talents and skills of these students. Kanavu's students have won a slew of prizes in cultural competitions at the district and state levels. (Mohan, Neethu 2014)

Thus it is clearly evident that tribal students are just as talented and skilled in assorted extracurricular activities as their counterparts in mainstream schools. Regrettably, however, their peculiar gifts find few avenues for expression, given the pitfalls obtaining in the current education scenario prevailing in most present-day schools. They need to be constantly encouraged to do their best - and given equal opportunities to display their unique talents - in order for them to be able to compete, on an equal footing, with students from mainstream schools.

Suggestions

- It ought to be made mandatory for school authorities to appoint a “school social worker” who is adequately equipped to deal with community level problems of tribal students.
- The school social worker should make it a point to visit those students who frequently absent themselves from school and attempt to study the underlying reasons for such sustained absenteeism.
- It is necessary that systematic follow ups be undertaken on the basis of inquiries instituted with the support of teachers, school authorities and tribal supporters.
- Teachers, accompanied by the school social worker and tribal supporters, ought to visit the parents concerned in order to offer appropriate guidance on the importance of education.

- Frequent health check-ups need to be provided to ensure that tribal students enjoy sound health. This will result in the currently high absenteeism rates (due to health issues) registering a steep decline.
- Tribal students with consistently high attendance at school should be suitably rewarded by being offered appropriate incentives.
- Remedial classes should be made freely available for students showing poor academic performance.
- High-level officials responsible for school education should check the functioning of schools frequently, especially looking into issues relating to teaching methodology, working hours and attendance registers.
- Regular attendance at school should be made a mandatory criterion for providing tribal students grants and merit scholarships.
- Pioneering institutions that function along the lines of “Kanavu” should be launched, in addition to the ones in existence, to promote excellence in extracurricular activities involving tribal children.

Conclusion

Irrespective of the many educational scholarship programmes implemented by the government, the study reveals that tribal students do not, on the whole, display academic excellence of any sort. There are also large numbers of absentees and school dropouts. The paper explains the reasons for absenteeism among tribal students including long haul commutes from the tribal settlements (in hilly and isolated areas) to school, and the fact that these school-goers state that they would rather spend time with their friends than pick up the rudiments of learning. It is also evident that teachers are responsive, when it comes to enquiries about the reasons for student absenteeism, from the families concerned. But the need of the hour is for the official authorities to take a tough stand in curtailing the increasing numbers of dropouts and preventing absenteeism among this particular set of students. Further research in this area would help the government formulate innovative policies and programmes aimed at promoting academic excellence in tribal students.

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