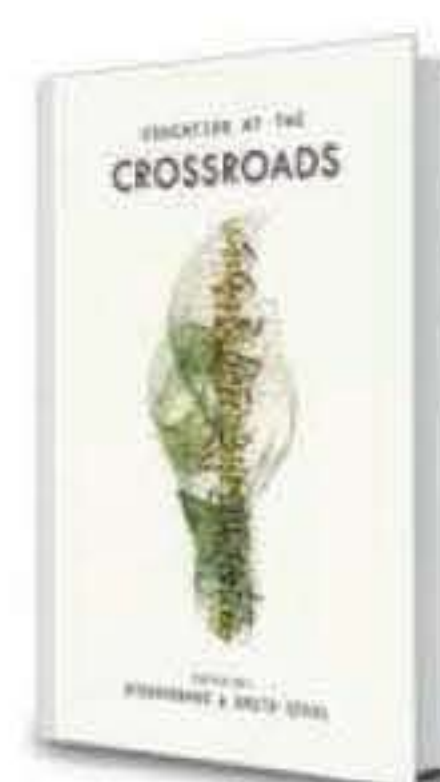
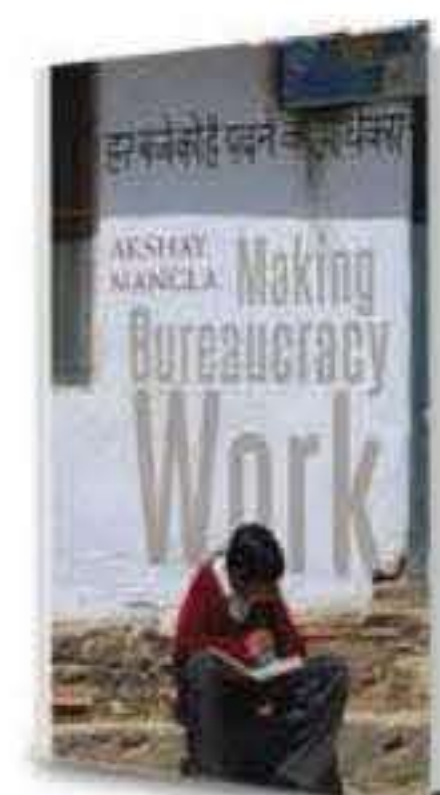
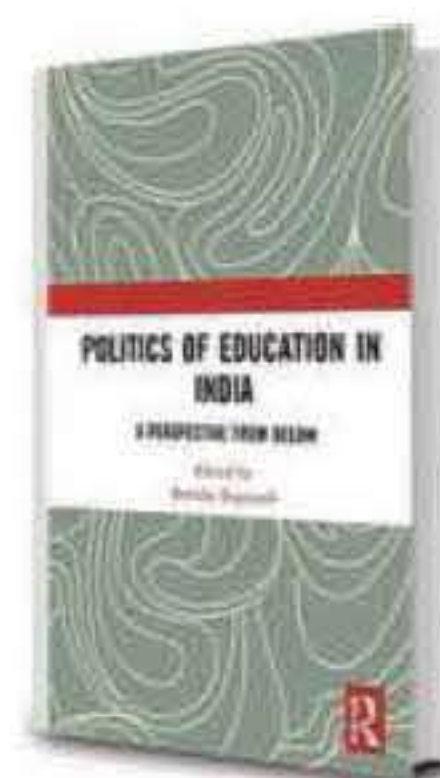




**Accessible for all:** Girls from a tribal community wash utensils after the mid-day meal at their school near the Lanjigarh area of Kalahandi district of Odisha. BISWARANJAN ROUT



# Smaller citizens: how to bridge the gaps in India's education system

Writers explore the persistent hierarchy between social groups in education, and explain why Scheduled Tribes are still the most disadvantaged. They offer remedial measures, including the role of the bureaucracy in providing quality services at the local level

**Sudipta Datta**

In the Annual Status of Education Report, titled 'ASER 2023: Beyond Basics', released in January, a survey by civil society organisation Pratham among rural students aged 14 to 18 years found that more than half struggled with basic mathematics, a skill they should have mastered in Classes 3 and 4. The household survey conducted in 28 districts across 26 States assessed the foundational reading and arithmetic abilities of over 30,000 students and discovered that about 25% in this age group could not read a Class 2 level text in their vernacular. As they grew older, the rate of dropouts increased. While 3.9% of 14-year-olds were not in school, the figure climbed to 32.6% for 18-year-olds. Also, only 5.6% had opted for vocational training or other related courses. Subsequent surveys, including the recent India Employment Report 2024, prepared by the Institute for Human Development and the International Labour Organization, show that while access to education has improved for all social groups, "hierarchy between social groups persists; Scheduled Tribes are still the most disadvantaged."

In this backdrop, an important study on the unique problems being faced by one of the most marginalised communities of India, the Scheduled Tribes (STs), and what should be done is *Politics of Education in India: A Perspective from Below* (Routledge), edited by Ramdas Rupavath. In the Foreword, Werner Menski, Emeritus Professor of South Asian Laws SOAS, University of London, says the scenario where tribals remain

doubly disadvantaged and that too many tribal children are still growing up without formal educational provisions renders the study relevant for policymakers and educationists. The ground realities vary from State to State, and "familiar problems persist when official perceptions of tribal educational backwardness seem to overlook the undeniable presence of sophisticated forms of traditional knowledge that might well be activated and productively included within educational provisions."

## Local disconnect

Rupavath, in his Introduction, argues that education arrangements in India are not founded on the resident-driven standard. Rather, these seem to have been forced on them. "For instance, the training framework in India doesn't consider the local dialects of the tribals. Consequently, it is prompting only deficient improvement of the tribals." That said, he also stresses that education has brought a level of social portability for tribals. Divided in four sections, the book examines critical aspects of tribal communities from education, political participation, development issues, poverty, to the schemes in place to tackle the gap between the privileged and the downtrodden.

In his essay, Malli Gandhi focuses on the current needs of Adivasi children at all stages of school education. Transition rates from primary to upper primary and secondary school show significant dropouts, he writes, and the gender gap is high too. To improve the quality of education imparted to ST children, there needs to be "improvised pedagogy",

instruction in the mother tongue and support materials in tribal dialects. "There needs to be synchronisation between school activities and lives of students," says Gandhi.

## Working for the least advantaged

In his 2022 book, *Making Bureaucracy Work: Norms, Education and Public Service Delivery in Rural India* (Cambridge University Press), Akshay Mangla tries to find answers to these questions: how does the bureaucracy implement primary education in rural India, within the least likely settings? Why do some bureaucracies deliver education services more effectively than others? What makes the bureaucracy work for the least advantaged?

After more than two years of ethnographic field research in States like Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, he found that often informal rules guide public officials and their everyday relations with citizens, generating diverse ways of implementing policy and ensuring better outcomes. He illuminates the possibilities of the bureaucracy to promote inclusive development; and highlights the hurdles too.

The breathtaking expansion of primary schooling masks another disheartening trend, he notes, pointing out that "millions of children remain out of school, or receive services of abysmal quality, and are effectively denied education." He lists dilapidated school buildings, teacher absenteeism, dysfunctional classrooms, lack of monitoring and community engagement as some of the maladies afflicting primary education, whose impact can be seen in

their employment prospects when they become adults.

In his book of essays, *Smaller Citizens: Writings on the Making of Indian Citizens* (Orient BlackSwan), Krishna Kumar highlights gender and other inequalities – sex, caste, rich/poor, urban/rural divide – that persist in education. Kumar writes about the poor-quality teaching in many village schools. Mangla argues that to implement quality services, bureaucracies need to solve complex problems and adapt to local needs, "which is best achieved when bureaucratic norms encourage robust deliberation."

In *Education at the Crossroads* (Niyogi Books), edited by Apoorvanand and Omita Goyal, the writers highlight the state of education on campuses around the country. "Clearly, we can see that far from being engines of transformation in our social relations, educational institutions are mostly unequal spaces in themselves," says Apoorvanand in his essay. "The story is similar if we look at schools, where children from the Scheduled Castes and Tribes still do not feel at home. Stories of villages boycotting schools with a Dalit cook, for instance, are not exceptions."

The fundamental challenge facing education today, says Apoorvanand, is to conceive and design all its elements in such a way as to realise its democratic potential. "In a highly unequal world such as ours, which has to deal with a societal mind in which inequality and discrimination are deeply ingrained, it would mean equal and equitable distribution of resources at all levels. Bypassing this question does not help."