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Educational Inclusion, Identity, And Academic Challenges Among Matua Community Students in Higher Education Institutions of West Bengal

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Abstract

Educational inclusion has become a significant concern in contemporary higher education, particularly regarding historically marginalized communities. The Matua community, one of the largest Scheduled Caste groups in West Bengal, has made notable educational progress over recent decades due to reservation policies, scholarship schemes, and increased access to educational institutions. However, challenges related to social identity, discrimination, academic adjustment, and institutional support continue to influence students' educational experiences. This study examines educational inclusion, social identity, and academic challenges among Matua students enrolled in higher education institutions across West Bengal. The study specifically focuses on caste and community consciousness, experiences of discrimination and exclusion, campus support systems, academic performance, and the role of government policies and reservation benefits. Data were collected from 400 Matua students through a structured questionnaire. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis were employed to analyze the data. The findings reveal that strong community identity contributes positively to educational aspirations and academic engagement. However, experiences of subtle discrimination and social exclusion continue to affect students' confidence and participation. Institutional support mechanisms, including mentoring, counseling, faculty support, and scholarship facilitation, significantly enhance academic adjustment and performance. Government reservation policies and financial assistance programs have substantially improved educational access, although awareness regarding available benefits remains uneven. The study concludes that educational inclusion requires not only access but also supportive institutional environments that foster belonging, recognition, and academic success among marginalized students.

Keywords: Educational Inclusion, Matua Community, Social Identity, Higher Education, Academic Challenges, Scheduled Castes, West Bengal

1. Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a powerful instrument for social transformation, empowerment, and economic mobility. Higher education, in particular, provides individuals with opportunities to acquire advanced knowledge, professional skills, and social capital necessary for upward mobility. For marginalized communities, educational attainment represents a pathway to overcoming historical disadvantages and achieving socio-economic advancement. In India, affirmative action policies, reservation systems, and welfare schemes have attempted to

reduce educational inequalities among Scheduled Castes and other disadvantaged populations. Despite these initiatives, many communities continue to face barriers in accessing and benefiting from higher education.

The Matua community occupies a unique position within the social landscape of West Bengal. Emerging from the socio-religious reform movement led by Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur during the nineteenth century, the Matua movement advocated social equality, dignity, and educational advancement for marginalized groups. Education was viewed as a fundamental tool for liberation

from caste-based discrimination and socio-economic exclusion.

Over the years, educational participation among Matua students has increased significantly. Nevertheless, inclusion in higher education extends beyond enrollment. Students often encounter challenges related to identity, discrimination, financial constraints, cultural adaptation, and academic adjustment. Educational inclusion requires institutions to create environments where students feel accepted, supported, and capable of achieving their academic potential.

This study investigates the educational experiences of Matua students in higher education institutions in West Bengal. It examines how social identity influences academic participation, explores experiences of discrimination and exclusion, evaluates campus support systems, and assesses the impact of government policies on educational outcomes.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the educational experiences of Matua students in higher education institutions.
2. To investigate the impact of social identity on academic participation and achievement.
3. To assess the effectiveness of institutional support mechanisms for Matua students.

3. Research Methodology

The study employed a descriptive and analytical research design. Data were collected from 400 Matua students studying in colleges and universities across North 24 Parganas, Nadia, South 24 Parganas, and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal.

A structured questionnaire was developed consisting of sections on demographic characteristics, social identity, discrimination experiences, institutional support, academic adjustment, and awareness of government schemes. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Stratified random sampling was used to ensure representation from both rural and urban areas. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, percentages, mean scores, correlation analysis, and multiple regression techniques.

4. Data Analysis

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics (N = 400)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	220	55.0
	Female	180	45.0
Residence	Rural	260	65.0
	Urban	140	35.0
Undergraduate		280	70.0
Postgraduate		120	30.0
First-Generation Learners		285	71.3
Non-First Generation		115	28.7

The demographic profile indicates that a majority of respondents belong to rural areas and are first-generation

learners. This reflects the ongoing educational mobility within the Matua community.

5. Social Identity and Community Consciousness

Social identity emerged as a significant factor influencing educational experiences. Students expressed strong attachment to their community and viewed educational achievement as a means of improving collective social status.

Table 2: Social Identity and Community Consciousness

Statement	Mean	SD
I am proud of my Matua identity	4.35	0.69
Community identity motivates my education	4.11	0.78
Community organizations support education	4.02	0.81
Education improves community status	4.42	0.63

The results suggest that educational aspirations are closely linked to community consciousness. Students perceive higher education as a vehicle for both personal advancement and collective empowerment.

6. Experiences of Discrimination and Exclusion

Despite constitutional protections, many respondents reported experiencing subtle forms of discrimination and exclusion.

Table 3: Experiences of Discrimination

Experience	Yes (%)	No (%)
Faced caste stereotypes	48.0	52.0
Social exclusion by peers	35.5	64.5
Hesitant to reveal caste identity	42.8	57.2
Perceived unequal treatment	31.3	68.7

Nearly half of the respondents reported encountering caste-related stereotypes. Although overt discrimination has decreased, subtle exclusionary practices continue to influence educational experiences and academic confidence.

7. Campus Support Systems

Institutional support plays a critical role in facilitating educational inclusion and academic success.

Table 4: Institutional Support Services

Support Service	Mean
Faculty Support	3.82
Academic Counseling	3.68
Scholarship Assistance	3.94
Career Guidance	3.56
Mentoring Programs	3.49

Students expressed relatively positive perceptions of faculty support and scholarship assistance. However, mentoring and career guidance services received comparatively lower ratings, suggesting areas for institutional improvement.

8. Academic Adjustment and Performance

Academic adjustment refers to students' ability to adapt to educational environments, participate in learning activities, and maintain academic performance.

Table 5: Academic Adjustment Indicators

Indicator	Mean	SD
Classroom Participation	3.74	0.69
Academic Confidence	3.62	0.73
Faculty Interaction	3.78	0.67
Examination Performance	3.71	0.71
Overall Adjustment	3.71	0.70

The findings indicate moderate to high levels of academic adjustment. Students who reported receiving greater institutional support demonstrated stronger academic confidence and participation.

9. Government Policies and Reservation Benefits

Government interventions have significantly expanded educational opportunities for Matua students.

Table 6: Access to Government Benefits

Benefit	Percentage
Received Scholarship	72.0
Benefited from Reservation	78.5
Aware of Educational Schemes	64.8
Satisfied with Government Support	58.3

The data demonstrate the positive impact of affirmative action policies. However, awareness regarding educational schemes remains insufficient for a substantial proportion of students.

Table 7: Correlation Matrix

Variable	Social Identity	Institutional Support	Academic Adjustment
Social Identity	1.000	0.521**	0.487**
Institutional Support	0.521**	1.000	0.693**
Academic Adjustment	0.487**	0.693**	1.000

$p < 0.01$

The analysis reveals significant positive relationships among the variables. Institutional support demonstrates the strongest association with academic adjustment, indicating its critical role in student success.

Table 8: Predictors of Academic Adjustment

Predictor	Beta	t-value	p-value
Social Identity	0.281	5.84	0.000
Institutional Support	0.472	9.65	0.000
Reservation Benefits	0.214	4.92	0.000

$R^2 = 0.612$

The model explains 61.2 percent of the variation in academic adjustment. Institutional support emerges as the strongest predictor, followed by social identity and reservation benefits.

10. Discussion

The findings highlight the complex relationship between educational inclusion, social identity, and academic performance among Matua students. Strong community identity serves as a source of motivation and resilience. Students derive confidence and purpose from their community affiliations, reinforcing educational aspirations and persistence.

At the same time, experiences of discrimination and exclusion continue to affect educational participation. While overt caste-based discrimination appears less common than in previous decades, subtle stereotypes and social distancing remain present within higher education institutions. Such experiences can undermine students' sense of belonging and academic confidence.

Institutional support mechanisms significantly improve educational outcomes. Faculty support, scholarship assistance, mentoring, and counseling contribute positively to academic adjustment. Students receiving greater support demonstrate higher participation, stronger confidence, and better academic performance.

Government reservation policies and scholarships have substantially enhanced educational access. However, awareness and utilization of available benefits remain uneven. Institutions must strengthen outreach efforts to ensure that eligible students can fully benefit from support schemes.

11. Conclusion

The study concludes that educational inclusion among Matua students has improved considerably due to affirmative action policies, scholarship programs, and expanding access to higher education. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain regarding social inclusion, academic adjustment, and institutional support.

Social identity plays a positive role in fostering educational aspirations and community empowerment. However, experiences of discrimination and exclusion continue to influence students' educational experiences. Institutional support systems are essential for promoting academic success and reducing educational inequalities.

The findings emphasize that educational inclusion should extend beyond enrollment and encompass recognition, participation, support, and achievement. Creating inclusive campus environments is crucial for ensuring that marginalized students can realize their full educational potential.

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