

Educational Aspirations and Tribal School Students: A Rural-Urban Comparative Study in Western West Bengal

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Abstract

Educational aspirations determine students' future goals and the level of education they wish to achieve. This study aims to explore the level of educational aspirations of tribal students in rural and urban areas of Paschim Bardhaman district in West Bengal. It also aims to examine the difference between educational aspirations and students' gender. A self-made semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect general information, and the "Level of Educational Aspiration Test" by Yashmin Ghani Khan (1999) was used to identify the level of aspiration of students. The study was conducted on 82 tribal learners of 2 schools in Paschim Bardhaman district. The descriptive statistical tools t-test and frequency tables were used to analyze the data. The study found that there was no significant difference in educational aspirations and gender among the tribal students, but area emerged as a significant differentiating factor, with rural students demonstrating notably higher aspirations than urban students. Despite limited awareness of higher education opportunities, tribal students showed a positive and goal-oriented attitude toward schooling. There is a need to highlight the need for targeted interventions to expand their knowledge of different educational and career paths.

Keywords: Educational Aspiration, Tribal School Students, Gender, Urban, Rural.

Introduction

Understanding the Educational Aspirations of Students

Educational aspirations reflect what students ideally wish to accomplish in their academic journey and are closely tied to their long-term career ambitions (Chen & Hesketh, 2021). Indeed, these aspirations keep students motivated and are closely connected to the careers they hope to pursue later in life (Saha & Sikora, 2008). Moreover, these aspirations are foundational to a student's self-perception of academic capability and act as an early, critical driver in the career development pathway (Khattab, 2015). In this regard, the researcher also explained that aspirations are rooted in the cultural sphere of society and are shaped by shared values, while the parent-child relationship plays a key role in transmitting family cultural values that shape a child's aspirations, career choices, and propensity to pursue additional education.

Furthermore, the degree of educational aspiration is correlated with aspects of the school environment, family, and individual interests (Madarasova Geckova et al., 2010). Understanding these goals is vital because education is a primary instrument for human development.

Specifically, in the secondary stage of education, these aspirations serve as a critical bridge between primary foundations and adolescence, influencing long-term life outcomes and economic prosperity. During the secondary school years, adolescents begin to form and consolidate future-oriented academic and occupational goals that carry significant long-term consequences. Accordingly, Schoon (2001) established that higher career aspirations formed during adolescence are strongly predictive of greater educational attainment as individuals transition into early adulthood. Building on this foundation, Ashby and Schoon (2010) further demonstrated that these early aspirations continue to exert influence into mid-adulthood, where they are linked to higher earnings and improved social status over time. From an economic perspective, Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah (2011) documented that individuals with higher career aspirations are better positioned in the labor market; they are considered more qualified, face a lower risk of unemployment, and consistently secure higher lifetime earnings compared to their lower-aspiring counterparts. Thus, when students possess clear, ambitious aspirations, they are more likely to engage with the curriculum and persist through academic challenges. Consequently, identifying these aspirations allows educators to align instructional support with students' personal visions.

In this context, as stated by Education Commissioner C. S. Kothari ("Education and National Development," 1970), the future of this nation is moulded in the classroom. That is, the classrooms of the country are the foundation upon which the nation's future is built. Meeting the educational aspirations of young people through suitable opportunities, therefore, promotes their development and elevates their standing in the global arena. For this reason, the educational aspirations of tribal school students are a worthwhile topic to study.

Factors Influencing Educational Aspirations

A student's aspirations are rarely formed in isolation. Students' aspirations are shaped by their families' socioeconomic position and accessibility, with disadvantaged groups facing greater

academic expectation gaps (Landge, 2024). Tribal communities, which comprise approximately 8.6% of India's population, face persistent educational challenges. West Bengal's tribal population is 5.8% (Census, 2011), with 6.3% in undivided Bardhaman. The western rural blocks of Paschim Bardhaman are historically marginalized educationally. Mahapatra (2024) noted a widening tribal attainment gap, while Miranda and Rodriguez (2022) highlighted the cultural factors shaping rural students' educational aspirations. Rashmi and Paul (2022) found that tribal children's educational well-being is significantly lower, driven by early childhood household economic conditions; that is, aspiration ceilings form before secondary school even begins.

However, most existing studies treat educational aspiration merely as a byproduct of enrolment or dropout, rather than examining it as a distinct psychological construct among tribal secondary-level students, who remain largely underexplored compared to university-level populations. Similarly, while gender and economic disparities in education are well documented in terms of access and dropout, little research examines how gender specifically shapes the aspirations tribal boys and girls form for themselves, or the psychological and cultural mechanisms driving this difference. No study to date has combined these dimensions—aspiration as a distinct construct, the secondary-school stage, and gender-based variation—within a single tribal population, such as the Scheduled Tribe students of Paschim Bardhaman district, West Bengal. Therefore, a clear gap exists for a focused study measuring educational aspiration as an independent construct among tribal secondary students, with attention to gender-based differences in aspiration formation[S1].

[S1]The research gap is formulated concisely and explicitly connected with the objectives and hypotheses and added to the literature review section.

Literature Review

Over the last two decades, many studies have been conducted on students' educational aspirations. These studies have studied various aspects of educational aspirations. According to Sarkar and Mistri's (2018), societal progress requires raising

awareness of education and reducing gender and class-caste conflict at the micro-level. As per Pal and Sarkar (2022), tribal and non-tribal students have different job goals. As stated by Dey and Gildyal (2020), tribal people spend their maximum wealth on meeting their most basic requirements. Education is considered only a low-level need. There was little desire or need for schooling. They struggle to meet their fundamental requirements, such as clothing, food, and shelter, and they lack the motivation to consider higher-order wants, such as security or self-worth, which are related to education. Saikia (2017) examined how tribal and non-tribal higher secondary students' educational goals differed. However, the study found that both tribal and non-tribal students had similar goals.

Currently, Singh and Devi (2020) emphasize that education is a vital tool for empowering tribal communities. However, Scheduled Tribe students continue to face persistent barriers, including poverty, geographical isolation, poor infrastructure, and language difficulties, which collectively suppress their academic goals. Educational choice practices are dependent on families' access to social capital. Tribal families belonging to low socio-economic status prefer to send their students to government schools rather than private schools (Mahapatra, 2025). In Orisa, high pupil-teacher ratios, few Scheduled Tribe teachers, institutional fragmentation, and weak infrastructure, especially at the higher secondary level, worsened the problem (Kujur and Das, 2026). Most existing studies examine barriers to enrolment or dropout rather than measuring educational aspirations as a distinct psychological construct among tribal secondary students specifically. Vyas (2025) identifies that career aspirations among rural secondary students are heavily constrained by parental influence, socioeconomic status, gender norms, and limited access to institutional support, noting that existing research has largely concentrated on university-level aspirations, leaving secondary-level rural students considerably underexplored. The rural-urban divide significantly shapes aspiration levels among students. In addition, gender further compounds these inequalities. Tilak and Choudhury (2021) found that although the overall gender gap in higher education enrolment has narrowed across

India, it remains persistently significant in rural tribal areas and among poor families, where socio-cultural norms continue to restrict girls' academic ambitions. In addition, Rashmi and Paul (2022) established that household economic conditions during early childhood account for nearly 24 percent of the educational wellbeing gap between tribal and non-tribal children. This confirms that poverty directly suppresses the aspirations of tribal students at the secondary stage. Research documents gender gaps in enrolment and dropout but rarely examines how gender shapes the aspirations of tribal boys and girls at the secondary stage and what psychological or cultural mechanisms drive this difference.

Objective of the Study

- To identify the level of educational aspiration of tribal school students.
- To compare the educational aspirations of tribal school students concerning gender and rural-urban area.

Hypothesis

Based on the related literature and given objectives, the framed hypotheses are:

- H01: There is no significant difference in the educational aspirations of tribal school students with respect to gender.
- H02: There is no significant difference in the educational aspirations of tribal school students with respect to their area.

Methodology

A field survey was conducted for the primary data, and a descriptive analytical technique was used for the study. Respondents were tribal (Scheduled Tribe) students from government-aided secondary schools of Paschim Bardhaman district in West Bengal, India. The schools in Asansol Sub-division were selected by purposive sampling, e.g., Chelod High School and Kalla Haripada High School. Paschim Bardhaman district is the habitat of a huge tribal population. Undivided Bardhaman District has 7717563 tribal population (Census, 2011). School-going tribal students and their educational aspirations were unexplored in the newly formed Paschim Bardhaman district. The Researchers used

a General Information Schedule and a standardised scale for primary data collection. The standardised scale “Level of Educational Aspiration Test” by Yashmin Ghani Khan (1999) was used to measure the educational aspiration level. The total number of respondents was 82 tribal students aged between 13 and 17 years studying in eighth grade to tenth grade. The nature of the study area was rural and urban settings. Descriptive statistical methods, different frequency distribution tables, and t-tests were used for the analysis of the data. The Level of Educational Aspiration Test (LEAT), developed and standardized by Yashmin Ghani Khan (1999), was used to measure students’ educational aspiration. The reliability and validity of the tool have been established by the author in the test manual.

Results

Class-wise frequency distribution of tribal school students

Table 1 Class-wise Distribution of Tribal School Students

Class	No. of Students	Student (%)
VIII	46	56.10
IX	31	37.80
X	5	06.10
Total	82	100

Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

Among the respondents, more than half (56.10 %) studied in class VIII (age 13- 14). The next largest group of students studied in class IX (age 14-15); they were 37.80%. The fewest (6.10%) students studied in class X (age 15- 17) (Table-1).

Sex wise distribution of students

Table 2 Sex wise Distribution of Tribal School Students

Sex	No. of Students	Student (%)
Male	19	23.2
Female	63	76.8
Total	82	100

Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

Among the 82 respondents, the majority were female students (63), more than half of the sample

(76.8%). The remaining 19 students in the sample were male students, representing 23.2% of the total sample (Table 2).

School-wise distribution of students

Table 3 School-wise Distribution of Tribal School Students

Name of School	No. of Students	Student (%)
Chelod High School	40	48.8
Kalla Haripada High School	42	51.2
Total	82	100

Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

In the sample, 82 students were selected from two schools. 40 students were from Chelod High School, and 42 students were from Kalla Haripada High School (Table 3).

Location-wise distribution of students

Table 4 Location-wise Distribution of Tribal School Students

Location	No. of Students	Student (%)
Chelod	40	48.8
Kalla	42	51.2
Total	82	100

Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

The respondents were from two different areas. Approximately 48.8% of the students were from Chelod, a rural area, which is under Raniganj Block, and 51.2% of the students were from Kalla, an urban area, which is under the Asansol Municipal Corporation. This study area is situated in the Asansol Sub-division of Paschim Bardhaman district in West Bengal (Table 4).

Types of Family-wise Distribution of Students

Table 5 Types of Family of Tribal School Students

Types of Family	No. of Students	Student (%)
Nuclear	47	57.3
Joint	35	42.7
Total	82	100.0

Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

All the students in the sample live in two types of families. Most students live in a nuclear family (57.3 %), and 42.7% of students live in joint families (Table 5).

Area-wise Distribution of Students

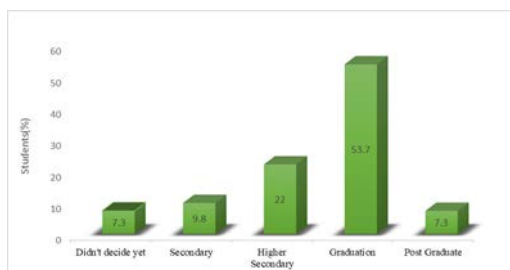
Table 6 Area-wise Distribution of Tribal School Students

Types of Area	No. of Students	Student (%)
Rural	40	48.8
Urban	42	51.2
Total	82	100

Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

The tribal students lead two different types of lifestyles: rural and urban. 48.8 % of students lead a rural lifestyle, and 51.2 % of students lead an urban lifestyle (Table 6).

Desired Level of Education among Tribal School Students



Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

Figure 1 The Desired Levels of Educational Aspiration among Tribal Secondary School Students

Students were asked to share their future goals from an academic perspective. Figure 1 shows that approximately 7.3% of students had not decided on their life goals. The majority (53.7%) of the students aimed to pursue up to graduate-level education. The second largest number of students (22%) decided to achieve a higher secondary level of education. Only 6% of the students set their goal to receive postgraduate-level education. No students were found to be aware of the higher education level after the postgraduate level.

Interest of the Students in Going to School

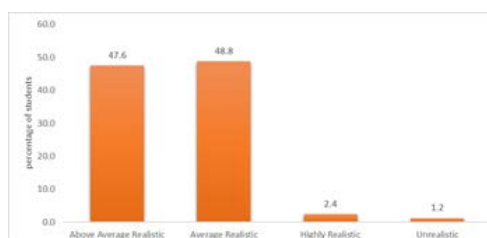
Table 8 Interest Level of the Tribal School Students in Going to School

No. of days	No. of Students	Students (%)
Every day (6 days)	55	67.1
5 Days in a Week	22	26.8
6 Days in a Week	4	4.9
Thrice a Week	1	1.2
Total	82	100.0

Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

In the surveyed group, the maximum number of students (67.1%) showed interest in going to school every day of the week. 26.8 % Of students are interested in 5 days a week, 4.9% of students are interested in 4 days a week, and 1.2% of students are interested in going to school three times a week.

Educational Aspiration Level among Tribal School Students



Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

Figure 2 The level of educational aspiration among tribal school students

Figure 2 shows the level of educational aspirations of tribal school students. Among the tribal students, a large number were aware of their goals to receive an education. The majority of the tribal students fell under the 'Above Average Realistic' (47.6%) and 'Average Realistic' (48.8%) categories. A small number of students (2.4%) were highly realistic. 1.2% of students were not yet thinking about their future.

Comparison of the Educational Aspirations of Tribal School Students with Respect to Gender
Table 9 Level of Educational Aspiration of Tribal School Students According to Gender

Level		Sex		Total
		Male	Female	
Above Average Realistic	Count	10	29	39
	% within level	25.6%	74.4%	100.0%
	% within sex	52.6%	46.0%	47.6%
	% of total	12.2%	35.4%	47.6%
Average Realistic	Count	9	31	40
	% within level	22.5%	77.5%	100.0%
	% within sex	47.4%	49.2%	48.8%
	% of total	11.0%	37.8%	48.8%
Highly Realistic	Count	0	2	2
	% within level	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% within sex	0.0%	3.2%	2.4%
	% of total	0.0%	2.4%	2.4%
Unrealistic	Count	0	1	1
	% within level	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% within sex	0.0%	1.6%	1.2%

	% of total	0.0%	1.2%	1.2%
Total	Count	19	63	82
	% within level	23.2%	76.8%	100.0%
	% within sex	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of total	23.2%	76.8%	100.0%

Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

Among 82 tribal students, 19 (23.2%) male students and 63 (76.8%) female students fall into different levels of educational aspiration. Ten male students (25.6%) and 29 female students (74.4%) fall under the 'Above Average Realistic' level of educational aspiration. Within the 'Average Realistic' level of educational aspiration, 22.5% of male students and 77.5% of female students are included. In the 'Highly Realistic' category, no male students were found; 100% of female students were found, where the total number of students in this category was 2. In the 'Unrealistic' category, 100% is occupied by female students of the total number in this category (Table 9).

Table 10 Mean, SD, 'p' Value, and 't' Value of the Level of Educational Aspiration of Tribal School Students According to Gender

N	Gender				t value	Sig. (2-tailed)	Level of Significance
	Boys (19)		Girls (63)				
82	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	0.525	0.601	S (0.05)
	41.53	3.39	40.94	4.52			

* S= Significant on 0.05, NS = Non-significant. Source: Primary Survey, November 2025

The p-value (Sig. 2-tailed) is 0.601, which is greater than 0.05 (Significance level). Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted. This means that there is no statistically significant difference in the

educational aspirations of tribal school students with respect to gender. The mean difference between the two gender groups is negligibly small (0.59) (Table 10).

Comparison of the Educational Aspirations of Tribal School Students with Respect to their Area (Rural-Urban)

Table 11 Shows Frequency Distribution of the Level of Educational Aspiration of Tribal School Students According to Gender

Types of Area Level

Types of Area		Level				Total
		Above Average Realistic	Average Realistic	Highly Realistic	Unrealistic	
Rural	Count	25	15	0	0	40
	% within TYPES OF AREA	62.5%	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	% within LEVEL	64.1%	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%	48.8%

Rural	% of Total	30.5%	18.3%	0.0%	0.0%	48.8%
Urban	Count	14	25	2	1	42
	% within TYPE OF AREA	33.3%	59.5%	4.8%	2.4%	100.0%
	% within LEVEL	35.9%	62.5%	100.0%	100.0%	51.2%
	% of Total	17.1%	30.5%	2.4%	1.2%	51.2%
Total	Count	39	40	2	1	82
	% within TYPES OF AREA	47.6%	48.8%	2.4%	1.2%	100.0%
	% within LEVEL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	47.6%	48.8%	2.4%	1.2%	100.0%

Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

The table presents the distribution of students' levels of educational aspiration according to their area of residence (rural and urban). Out of the total 82 students, 40 students (48.8%) belonged to rural areas, while 42 students (51.2%) belonged to urban areas. Among the rural students, the majority, 25 students (62.5%), were found in the "Above Average Realistic" category, while 15 students (37.5%) belonged to the "Average Realistic" category. No rural students were found in either the "Highly Realistic" or "Unrealistic" categories. In contrast, among the urban students, the highest proportion,

25 students (59.5%), belonged to the "Average Realistic" category. Further, 14 students (33.3%) were classified as "Above Average Realistic," while 2 students (4.8%) were "Highly Realistic" and 1 student (2.4%) was found to be "Unrealistic." Considering the total sample, the majority of students were distributed between the "Average Realistic" category (48.8%) and the "Above Average Realistic" category (47.6%). Only a very small proportion of students were identified as "Highly Realistic" (2.4%) and "Unrealistic" (1.2%) (Table 11).

Table 12 Shows Mean, SD, 'p' value, and 't' Value of the Level of Educational Aspiration of Tribal School Students According to Gender

N	Gender				t value	Sig. (2-tailed)	Level of Significance
	Boys (19)		Girls (63)				
82	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	2.06	S 0.043	S (0.05)
	42.05	3.23	40.14	4.93			

* S= Significant on 0.05, NS = Non-significant. Source: Primary Survey, November, 2025

There is a statistically significant difference in the educational aspirations of tribal school students in terms of their area. The p-value is 0.043. This is less than 0.05 (Significance level). Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected, and area emerges as a significant factor influencing the educational aspirations of tribal school students. The mean difference of 1.91 points confirms that rural students hold notably higher educational aspirations than urban students.

Discussion

Main Findings

Class VIII students were the most dominant in

the sample. More than half of the tribal students (56.10%) were from Class VIII, under the age range of 13–14 years.

A large majority of respondents were female (76.8%), compared to male students (23.2%), reflecting a higher enrolment of tribal girls at this level in the study area.

Nuclear families were more prevalent in the study. Of the participants, 57.3% of tribal students lived in nuclear families and 42.7% lived in joint families, indicating a gradual shift toward nuclear family structures among tribal communities.

Nearly equal representation was found in rural and urban areas of the country. Of the students,

48.8% were from a rural area (Chelod) and 51.2% from an urban area (Kalla). This provides a balanced geographical representation of the two locations in the Paschim Bardhaman district.

Graduate level was the most common educational goal. The majority of students (53.7%) aspired to complete their graduation. However, awareness about postgraduate and higher education levels was very limited, with only 6% targeting postgraduate education and none aiming beyond it.

Most students showed a strong interest in attending school. 67.1% of tribal students expressed interest in attending school every day (6 days), reflecting a generally positive attitude toward education among tribal school students.

Educational aspirations of the tribal school students were mostly spread across “average to above-average realistic”. Nearly all students fell under the “Average Realistic” (48.8%) and “Above Average Realistic” (47.6%) categories. It suggests that students had meaningful academic goals, but their knowledge about diverse educational pathways remained limited. The result shows that almost all the students were serious about their future goals, with limited knowledge about different perspectives of education.

The gender of tribal students did not significantly affect educational aspirations. The t-test result (t value = 0.525, p value = 0.601) confirmed no statistically significant difference in educational aspirations between male and female tribal students. The null hypothesis was accepted, establishing that both boys and girls had almost similar educational aspirations.

The area of the school where tribal students are located significantly influences their educational aspirations. Rural students recorded a notably higher mean aspiration score (42.05) than urban students (40.14). The t-test result (t value = 2.06, p value = 0.043) confirmed a statistically significant difference. The results led to the rejection of the null hypothesis, which means that there is a significant difference between rural and urban tribal school students. Rural students were more concentrated in the “Above Average Realistic” category (62.5%), while urban students were spread across the comparatively lower aspiration level “Average Realistic” category, but the

categories of “Highly Realistic” and “Unrealistic” were observed only among urban students.

Conclusion

The present study indicates that tribal school students in the Asansol sub-division generally hold average to above-average realistic levels of educational aspiration, with graduation emerging as their most common academic goal. While gender did not significantly differentiate aspiration levels, area of residence proved to be a crucial factor, with rural tribal students displaying higher and more consistent aspirations than their urban counterparts. These findings suggest that although tribal students maintain a generally positive and goal-oriented outlook toward education, limited awareness of higher education opportunities constrains the scope of their aspirations, particularly in urban areas. Targeted interventions that improve awareness of diverse educational and career pathways could meaningfully elevate aspiration levels among this population.

Suggestions

In light of the findings presented above, this section outlines policy recommendations aimed at strengthening educational aspirations and outcomes for tribal students in West Bengal.

For Policymakers

As urban tribal students show lower and less consistent aspirations, targeted awareness programs on higher education and careers are needed. Tribal-majority schools should also establish career counselling cells with trained staff to guide students toward broader academic and vocational options. Finally, district-level monitoring should track aspirations and outcomes separately for rural and urban students to enable area-specific policy corrections.

For Educators

Schools, especially in urban tribal areas with lower aspiration levels, should add structured career guidance sessions, exposure visits to colleges and workplaces, and motivational talks by tribal role models and alumni to broaden students' sense of possibility.

For Tribal Communities

Village councils and parent-teacher meetings should be hosted at the community level, partnering with local NGOs and tribal welfare bodies to run informational workshops on the value of education beyond graduation, so that family and community expectations reinforce students' aspirations.

Future Research Directions

Future studies could extend this investigation beyond the Asansol sub-division to other sub-divisions or districts of West Bengal to test the generalizability of the rural-urban difference in educational aspirations among tribal students.

Further research could examine mediating or moderating variables not covered here, such as parental education, household income, school infrastructure, peer influence, and access to digital resources to better explain the rural-urban aspiration gap.

Comparative studies between tribal and non-tribal student populations within the same sub-division could help isolate the specific effects of tribal identity from broader socio-economic factors.

Qualitative research, using interviews or focus group discussions with urban tribal students, could offer deeper insights into the specific barriers or misinformation contributing to their comparatively lower aspiration levels.

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