



Empowerment of Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe Women through Open Distance Learning: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

Empowerment of marginalized communities, especially women belonging to Schedule Caste (SC) and Schedule Tribe (ST) groups, remains a critical concern in India. Education, particularly through Open Distance Learning (ODL), holds promise as a tool for their upliftment. This empirical study investigates the impact of ODL programs on the empowerment of SC and ST women. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the research assesses the educational, social, economic, and psychological dimensions of empowerment. Findings suggest that ODL plays a significant role in enhancing the empowerment of SC and ST women, offering insights for policymakers, educators, and practitioners to further leverage distance learning for inclusive development.

Keywords: Empowerment, schedule caste, schedule tribe, women, open distance learning, India

1. Introduction

Empowerment of marginalized communities, especially women belonging to Schedule Caste (SC) and Schedule Tribe (ST) groups, has long been a formidable challenge in India. Despite numerous legislative measures and affirmative action policies, these communities persistently grapple with socio-economic disparities, limited educational opportunities, and systemic barriers to progress. Education stands out as a powerful instrument for fostering empowerment, offering a pathway to break free from the shackles of poverty and discrimination. In this milieu, Open Distance Learning (ODL) emerges as a promising avenue to deliver education in a flexible and accessible manner to marginalized populations. ODL, characterized by its flexibility and adaptability, holds the potential to address the unique challenges faced by SC and ST women in accessing education. By transcending geographical barriers and offering asynchronous learning opportunities, ODL can reach remote and marginalized communities where traditional educational infrastructure may be lacking. Moreover, the flexibility of ODL allows women to balance their educational pursuits with familial and domestic responsibilities, thereby overcoming one of the primary obstacles to their participation in formal education.

This empirical study seeks to delve into the transformative role of ODL in empowering SC and ST women, examining its impact across various dimensions of empowerment. By employing a mixed-method approach encompassing both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the research

endeavors to unravel the intricate interplay between ODL participation and the empowerment trajectories of marginalized women. Through a nuanced analysis of educational attainment, socio-economic status, agency, and well-being, the study aims to shed light on the holistic empowerment outcomes facilitated by ODL interventions.

As the global discourse increasingly emphasizes the importance of inclusive and equitable education, particularly in the context of marginalized communities, understanding the efficacy of ODL in fostering empowerment assumes paramount significance. By elucidating the mechanisms through which ODL empowers SC and ST women, this study not only contributes to the scholarly literature on education and empowerment but also informs policy interventions and programmatic initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive development. Ultimately, the findings of this study have the potential to catalyze transformative change by amplifying the voices and agency of marginalized women, thereby advancing the cause of social justice and equity in India.

2. Women Empowerment

Women empowerment encompasses a multifaceted process aimed at bolstering the capacity, agency, and participation of women across diverse spheres of society. At its core, this concept strives to dismantle entrenched power structures, challenge societal norms, and rectify existing inequalities that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and marginalization. Rooted in the fundamental belief in women's autonomy and

rights, empowerment endeavors to afford women the freedom to control their destinies, exercise unfettered choices, and access equitable opportunities and resources across social, economic, political, and cultural domains.

Access to quality education serves as a cornerstone of women's empowerment, providing them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to navigate societal expectations, confront stereotypes, and pursue their aspirations. By equipping women with the tools to challenge prevailing narratives and actively engage in community and civic life, education not only enhances their economic prospects but also fosters greater decision-making autonomy and agency. Moreover, economic empowerment initiatives play a pivotal role in ensuring women's financial independence and equal access to resources, thereby mitigating socio-economic disparities and enabling women to pursue livelihood opportunities on par with their male counterparts.

In addition to education and economic autonomy, political participation stands as a vital avenue for women's empowerment, enabling their substantive involvement in decision-making processes at all levels of governance. By advocating for gender-responsive policies, laws, and leadership representation, women can actively shape the socio-political landscape, contributing to more inclusive and equitable societies. Moreover, holistic empowerment encompasses safeguarding women's health, well-being, social and cultural rights, as well as ensuring their access to justice and protection from violence and discrimination. Together, these interconnected components form the bedrock of women's empowerment efforts, necessitating collaborative action across sectors to dismantle barriers, foster gender equality, and cultivate environments conducive to women's holistic development and fulfillment of their potential.

3. Review of Earlier Works

The concept of empowerment, particularly concerning marginalized communities, is widely acknowledged as multifaceted, encompassing economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions (Kabeer, 2005) ^[3]. Within this framework, education emerges as a pivotal driver of empowerment, empowering individuals to challenge oppressive structures, enhance their agency, and uplift their socio-economic status (Sen, 1999) ^[10]. However, marginalized populations often face barriers to accessing education due to various socio-economic factors.

Open Distance Learning (ODL) has emerged as a promising solution to address the challenges of education accessibility faced by marginalized communities. ODL offers flexibility, affordability, and scalability, making education more accessible to individuals who may encounter barriers to traditional forms of learning (Moore & Kearsley, 2012) ^[6]. By providing remote access to educational resources and opportunities, ODL has the potential to empower marginalized individuals by equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate socio-economic challenges.

Aparajita Sarangi and Gitanjali Mishra (2013) ^[9] re-examine the correlation between women's socio-economic status and their political engagement in tribal and non-tribal regions of Odisha. Their findings emphasize the significance of crafting policy-making strategies aimed at ensuring effective involvement of women, with a particular emphasis on leveraging ODL to provide educational opportunities that can enhance women's political participation. Building upon this, Artatrana Gochhayat (2013) ^[2] delves into the level of

women's engagement in the functioning and electoral processes of Panchayats in Dhenkanal District, Odisha. The study reveals an alarming trend of insufficient participation among women, highlighting political apathy and a lack of awareness. However, it also underscores the potential of ODL to educate and empower women, thereby enabling them to actively contribute to local governance.

Furthermore, Ashok Kumar H. and H. M. Mohan Kumari (2014) contribute to the discourse by discussing the socio-economic barriers that limit women's effective involvement in Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs). They advocate for realistic strategies to overcome these constraints, suggesting that ODL can play a crucial role in imparting the necessary skills and knowledge for women to navigate the decision-making processes in PRIs. Echoing these sentiments, Jayshree Mangubhai *et al.* (2009) ^[5] investigate the challenges faced by Dalit women in winning Panchayat elections, emphasizing the importance of factors such as education and community mobilization. ODL emerges as a potential solution to address educational disparities and empower Dalit women with the confidence and skills needed to participate in political processes.

Moreover, Mahanta and Sinha (2007) ^[13] identify various factors influencing women's participation in PRI elections, ranging from societal constraints to pressures from family and political parties. They posit that ODL can serve as a platform to educate women about their rights and empower them to overcome these barriers, thereby enhancing their political agency. Patnaik (2005) ^[7] adds to this discourse by emphasizing the need to assess the efficacy of numerical representation in empowering marginalized women in PRIs. ODL, through capacity-building initiatives tailored to the needs of disadvantaged women, can enable them to exercise real power in local governance.

Examining the empowerment scenario of women in PRIs, Pramod Kumar Ray (2015) ^[8] highlights the transformative impact of reservations on rural women's status, underscoring the potential of ODL to provide access to education and information, fostering self-confidence and political knowledge. Additionally, Ram Babu and AN Panda (2015) ^[11] contextualize the historical significance of Panchayat Raj in India and advocate for women's engagement in mainstream political activities, facilitated by ODL initiatives aimed at enhancing their political literacy and participation. Finally, Rashmi Srivastava (2011) ^[12] emphasizes the challenges of minority representation of women in political decision-making bodies and suggests that ODL can address gender disparities by providing women with the necessary skills and resources to contest elections effectively and advocate for their rights.

Despite the recognized potential of ODL in empowering marginalized communities, empirical studies specifically focusing on the empowerment outcomes of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women through ODL remain limited. This gap in the literature underscores the need for further investigation into the effectiveness of ODL interventions in promoting the empowerment of SC and ST women. By exploring the impact of ODL on various dimensions of empowerment, including economic, social, political, and psychological aspects, researchers can contribute valuable insights to inform policy and practice aimed at fostering inclusive development and empowerment among marginalized populations.

4. Research Gap

The literature reveals a significant research gap regarding the empowerment outcomes of Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) women through Open Distance Learning (ODL). While recognizing the potential of ODL in empowering marginalized communities, there is a notable absence of empirical studies focusing specifically on the effectiveness of ODL in promoting the empowerment of SC and ST women. Despite existing research emphasizing the importance of education and political participation in empowering marginalized women, the specific impact of ODL interventions on SC and ST women's empowerment remains inadequately explored. This gap limits our understanding of how ODL initiatives can address the multifaceted challenges faced by SC and ST women, hindering the development of targeted policies and interventions. Further research is necessary to investigate the role of ODL in empowering SC and ST women across economic, social, political, and psychological dimensions, thereby providing valuable insights to inform inclusive development strategies and empowerment initiatives for marginalized communities.

5. Objectives of the Study

- i). To Assess the Impact of ODL Programs on the Empowerment of SC and ST Women
- ii). To Identify Factors Influencing the Empowerment Outcomes of SC and ST Women in ODL Programs
- iii). To suggest Policy and Practice for Inclusive Development and Women's Empowerment:

6. Hypotheses

- i). **Hypothesis 1:** SC and ST women enrolled in ODL programs will demonstrate significant improvements in educational attainment, including literacy levels, academic achievement, and skill development, compared to their counterparts without access to distance learning opportunities.
- ii). **Hypothesis 2:** Participation in ODL programs will positively impact the socio-economic status of SC and ST women, leading to enhanced income generation, employment opportunities, and financial independence, thereby contributing to their overall empowerment.
- iii). **Hypothesis 3:** ODL interventions will facilitate greater agency and decision-making autonomy among SC and ST women, empowering them to actively engage in community development initiatives, participate in local governance processes, and advocate for their rights and interests effectively.

7. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method approach to comprehensively examine the empowerment outcomes of SC and ST women enrolled in ODL programs. Quantitative surveys are administered to 180 ODL learners from both urban and rural areas, focusing on key empowerment indicators such as educational attainment, socio-economic status, agency, and well-being. Concurrently, in-depth qualitative interviews are conducted with a subset of participants to delve into their lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges regarding ODL engagement and empowerment journeys. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, this approach aims to triangulate findings, providing a nuanced understanding of empowerment

dynamics and informing targeted interventions for inclusive development.

8. Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis underscores the transformative role of ODL programs in empowering SC/ST women, with notable advancements in education, socio-economic status, and decision-making autonomy. Through its flexible and accessible approach, ODL effectively tackles systemic obstacles, enabling marginalized women to bolster their skill sets, participate in community initiatives, and strive towards financial autonomy. This holistic empowerment framework not only facilitates individual progress but also promotes broader societal inclusivity, emphasizing ODL's pivotal role in advancing the socio-economic well-being of SC/ST women.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)	18-25	40	22.22
	26-35	60	33.33
	36-45	50	27.77
	46 and above	30	16.66
Education Level	Secondary	70	38.88
	Higher Secondary	50	27.77
	Graduation	40	22.22
	Post-Graduation	20	11.11
Socio-Economic Status	Low Income	90	50
	Middle Income	60	33.33
	High Income	30	16.66
Location	Rural	100	55.55
	Urban	80	44.44
Category	SC	90	50
	ST	90	50

Source: Primary data

The demographic profile of the respondents in this study offers valuable insights into the composition and diversity of the sample population. Age distribution among the participants indicates a varied representation across different age groups. Notably, the largest proportion falls within the 26-35 age bracket, comprising 33.33% of the sample, followed closely by individuals aged 18-25, accounting for 22.22%. The distribution continues with 27.77% of respondents falling within the 36-45 age group and 16.66% aged 46 and above. This age diversity reflects a broad spectrum of life experiences and perspectives among the participants, which could influence their engagement with ODL programs and perceptions of empowerment.

Regarding educational attainment, the respondents exhibit a range of educational backgrounds, with the majority having completed secondary education (38.88%) or higher secondary education (27.77%). A substantial proportion also holds a graduation degree (22.22%), while a smaller percentage have pursued post-graduation studies (11.11%). This distribution underscores the importance of considering varying levels of educational preparedness and literacy in designing ODL programs tailored to the needs of diverse learners.

Socio-economic status emerges as another crucial dimension shaping the profile of the respondents. The sample comprises individuals from different socio-economic strata, with 50% classified as low-income earners, 33.33% as middle-income

earners, and 16.66% as high-income earners. This distribution highlights the socio-economic disparities within the participant pool and underscores the significance of addressing socio-economic inequalities in facilitating equitable access to educational opportunities and empowerment initiatives.

Residential location serves as a significant demographic characteristic, delineating the urban-rural divide among the respondents. While 55.55% of participants reside in rural areas, 44.44% are urban dwellers. This urban-rural distribution reflects the diverse geographical contexts within which ODL programs operate and underscores the importance of tailoring program delivery and content to address the specific needs and challenges faced by learners in different settings.

Lastly, the categorization based on social category-Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST)-underscores the importance of addressing issues of social inclusion and equity in educational interventions. With an equal representation of 50% each, SC and ST respondents highlight the need for targeted strategies to empower marginalized communities and bridge existing gaps in access to education and opportunities for socio-economic advancement.

Table 2: Pre and Post-Assessment Scores

Variable	Pre-Assessment Mean (SD)	Post-Assessment Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Literacy Levels	65.2 (12.3)	78.6 (10.5)	6.31	<0.001
Academic Achievement	72.8 (9.7)	81.4 (8.2)	5.52	<0.001
Skill Development	4.5 (1.2)	6.8 (1.5)	8.94	<0.001
Socio-Economic Status	3.2 (0.8)	4.6 (1.2)	9.12	<0.001
Agency and Autonomy	3.9 (1.1)	5.2 (1.3)	7.81	<0.001

Source: Primary data

Literacy Levels: The mean literacy level significantly increased from 65.2 (SD = 12.3) in the pre-assessment to 78.6 (SD = 10.5) in the post-assessment ($t(179) = 6.31, p < 0.001$), indicating a substantial improvement.

Academic Achievement: Participants showed a significant improvement in academic achievement, with mean scores increasing from 72.8 (SD = 9.7) in the pre-assessment to 81.4 (SD = 8.2) in the post-assessment ($t(179) = 5.52, p < 0.001$).

Skill Development: There was a notable improvement in skill development, with mean scores rising from 4.5 (SD = 1.2) in the pre-assessment to 6.8 (SD = 1.5) in the post-assessment ($t(179) = 8.94, p < 0.001$).

Socio-Economic Status: The socio-economic status of participants improved significantly, with mean scores increasing from 3.2 (SD = 0.8) in the pre-assessment to 4.6 (SD = 1.2) in the post-assessment ($t(179) = 9.12, p < 0.001$).

Agency and Autonomy: Participants demonstrated increased agency and autonomy, with mean scores rising from 3.9 (SD = 1.1) in the pre-assessment to 5.2 (SD = 1.3) in the post-assessment ($t(179) = 7.81, p < 0.001$), indicating a significant enhancement in decision-making abilities and autonomy.

These results suggest that participation in ODL programs has a positive impact on literacy levels, academic achievement, skill development, socio-economic status, and agency among SC and ST women.

Table 3: Income Generation and Employment Opportunities

Variable	Frequency of Employment (%)	Mean Monthly Income (SD) (in Rs.)	Mean Years of Employment (SD)
Pre-ODL Program	60	20,000 (10,000)	5.2 (2.1)
Post-ODL Program	80	45,000 (20,000)	7.8 (3.4)

Source: Primary data

- **Frequency of Employment:** The frequency of employment increased from 60% pre-ODL program to 80% post-ODL program, indicating a substantial improvement in employment opportunities among SC and ST women after participating in ODL programs.
- **Mean Monthly Income:** The mean monthly income showed an increase from Rs. 20,000 (SD = Rs. 10,000) pre-ODL program to Rs. 45,000 (SD = Rs. 20,000) post-ODL program. This suggests that participation in ODL programs led to a significant improvement in income generation among the respondents.
- **Mean Years of Employment:** The mean years of employment also increased from 5.2 years (SD = 2.1) pre-ODL program to 7.8 years (SD = 3.4) post-ODL program, indicating that SC and ST women who participated in ODL programs were able to sustain their employment for a longer duration.

These results imply that ODL programs have a positive impact on income generation and employment opportunities among SC and ST women, leading to higher employment rates, increased monthly income, and longer durations of employment, which contribute to their socio-economic empowerment.

Table 4: Agency and Decision-Making Autonomy

Variable	Frequency of Community Engagement (%)	Mean Decision-Making Score (SD)
Pre-ODL Program	45	3.5 (0.9)
Post-ODL Program	75	4.8 (1.2)

Source: Primary data

- **Frequency of Community Engagement:** The frequency of community engagement increased from 45% pre-ODL program to 75% post-ODL program. This indicates that SC and ST women became more involved in community activities after participating in ODL programs, which could be attributed to their enhanced confidence and skills gained through the programs.
- **Mean Decision-Making Score:** The mean decision-making score improved from 3.5 (SD = 0.9) pre-ODL program to 4.8 (SD = 1.2) post-ODL program. This suggests that SC and ST women exhibited greater autonomy and assertiveness in decision-making processes after completing ODL programs, possibly due to increased knowledge, skills, and self-confidence acquired through the programs.

Overall, the results indicate that ODL programs contribute to enhancing agency and decision-making autonomy among SC and ST women, empowering them to actively participate in

community activities and make informed decisions that affect their lives and communities positively

9. Major Findings of the Study

- i). **Education and Skill Development:** ODL programs led to significant improvements in literacy levels, academic achievement, and skill development among SC and ST women. The post-assessment scores showed substantial enhancements across these domains, indicating the effectiveness of ODL in promoting educational empowerment.
- ii). **Socio-Economic Status:** Participating in ODL programs resulted in a notable improvement in the socio-economic status of SC and ST women. There was a significant increase in employment rates, monthly income, and duration of employment post-ODL, highlighting the positive impact of these programs on economic empowerment.
- iii). **Agency and Decision-Making Autonomy:** ODL interventions facilitated greater agency and decision-making autonomy among SC and ST women. The participants demonstrated increased community engagement and higher scores in decision-making, reflecting their enhanced confidence and assertiveness after completing ODL programs.

10. Suggestions

- i). **Tailored ODL Programs:** Design ODL programs that cater specifically to the needs and challenges faced by SC and ST women, considering their diverse educational backgrounds, socio-economic status, and geographic locations. Incorporate interactive and participatory learning approaches to enhance engagement and effectiveness.
- ii). **Support Services:** Provide comprehensive support services, including mentorship, counseling, and access to resources, to address the socio-economic barriers faced by SC and ST women in pursuing ODL opportunities. Strengthen partnerships with local community organizations and government agencies to ensure holistic support.
- iii). **Capacity Building:** Invest in capacity building initiatives to empower SC and ST women with the necessary knowledge, skills, and confidence to actively participate in decision-making processes at the individual, household, and community levels. Foster leadership development programs to nurture future leaders from marginalized communities.

11. Conclusion

The findings underscore the transformative potential of ODL programs in empowering SC and ST women, contributing to their educational, economic, and social advancement. By addressing barriers to access and promoting inclusive learning environments, ODL initiatives have emerged as valuable tools for promoting empowerment and fostering inclusive development. However, sustained efforts are needed to address systemic inequalities and ensure the meaningful participation of marginalized communities in shaping their own destinies. Through targeted interventions and collaborative partnerships, ODL programs can serve as catalysts for positive change, empowering SC and ST women to realize their full potential and contribute to building more equitable and inclusive societies.

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