

# Obstacles to Achieve Higher Education for Socio-economically Disadvantaged Students of Rural Bengal: A Sociological Study

Dr. Sujay Sain

1. Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Sociology, Chhatna Chandidas Mahavidyalaya, Chhatna, Bankura, Affiliated to Bankura University, Bankura, West Bengal. Email- sujay.bu@gmail.com

## Abstract

It is the global agenda today that all section of our society will be included into higher education regardless of their socio-economic background. This is one of the agenda of Sustainable Development Goal 2030. But it is observed from various sources that socio-economically disadvantaged students are still struggling for achieving higher education. In this paper I have tried to analyse various facet of obstacles for socio-economically disadvantaged students of rural Bengal to achieve higher education by using both qualitative and quantitative method. Primary data have been collected from the field and analysed. Secondary data have also been used in this research. After analysing all types of data researcher has come to the conclusion that inclusion of socio-economically disadvantaged section into higher education has been partially done and the process is continuing for last couple of years successfully but challenges remain for achieving higher education for socio-economically disadvantaged students because high dropout rates among these students of socio-economically disadvantaged section. The main obstacle for achieving higher education for these socio-economically disadvantaged students is their economic crisis and social prejudice. Researcher also has identified several other factors responsible for this problem of achieving higher education. To overcome the problem researcher suggests that attractive financial support is essential for students of socio-economically disadvantaged section of our society.

**Keywords:** *Inclusive Education, Economic Crisis, Social Prejudice, Mixed methodology, Poverty.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education has the enormous power to improve social and economic conditions of poor people from their misery and distress. Poor people can achieve social justice, equality and have the chance of economic stability by dint of proper education. It is not only the goal of India but also one of the important global agenda today. India adopted Goal 4 of the 2030 agenda of Sustainable Development Goal in 2015 which seeks to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunity for all” (MHRD, 2020). But students of these destitute families are still struggling to achieve higher education because of lack of consciousness, social and environmental barriers, lack of education of their guardians, lack of proper planning for education, lack of aspiration for better education, and also economic crisis of the family (NUEPA, 2017).

Government has made many provisions for scheduled caste scheduled tribe, other backward class people and for the children of other disadvantaged groups. Substantial funds have been allocated for the development of education of these students of destitute families in the country. Today India’s higher education system has reached a new milestone in terms of expansion of higher education, establishment of new higher education institutions, and

promotion of equity to overcome regional and social imbalance in higher education. It is globally recognised today that India has improved higher education system significantly but still there has been some challenges remain because access to higher education is lagging behind the international threshold levels (UGC, 2011). In 2019-20 academic year 38.5 million students are enrolled in higher education of which 50.97 per cent (19.64 million) are male and 49.02 per cent (18.89 million) are female (AISHE 19-20). This is a great achievement that higher education in India has able to minimise gender difference and also able to include huge number of students from marginal section of society. Out of 38.53 million students SC, ST and OBC students comprise 5.66 million, 2.16 million and 14.25 million respectively. It is also very noteworthy that in each category gender disparity is significantly low.

Due to various measures taken by government in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> FYP (Five Year Plan) gross enrolment has been increased as well as social group disparity reduced drastically (UGC, 2011). In west Bengal also we have seen significant improvement and substantial expansion of higher education in last few decades. As per AISHE report 2019-20 total 21.61 lakh students are enrolled in West Bengal of which Male 10.70 lakh are male and 10.91 lakh are female. Out of total enrolment SC are 3.97 lakh, ST are 0.72 lakh, and OBC are 3.39 lakh. It is interesting to note that in West Bengal female enrolment is higher than male enrolment. But challenges remain for inclusion of Socio-economically disadvantaged students into higher education because in West Bengal 37.39 per cent students are coming from socially disadvantaged section whereas in India 57.28 per cent students are enrolled from socially disadvantaged section (Ministry of Education, 2020).

We all know that India is a stratified and caste-based society therefore the inclusion of marginalized backward people into the higher education is the greatest challenge but above all achieving higher education is the ultimate challenge and in this paper I have tried to analyse the problem of achieving higher education of Socio-economically disadvantaged group of people i.e. these marginal people of backward regions and villages of West Bengal. UGC launched large number of initiatives for the improvement of quality in higher education and to promote higher education for all section of society. But it is found that some of the initiatives either not undertaken or not took off during the plan period as it was planned (UGC, 2011, pp. 66-67).

Few initiatives were also taken in 11<sup>th</sup> FYP to strengthen achievement capacity of SC, ST students and for those students who are coming from marginal and disadvantage section of society. It was thought that this kind of initiatives will reduce dropout rate at higher education and improve performance of the disadvantaged group. But in reality, it is observed that most of the initiatives were either not implemented properly or ineffective due to various reasons. In this paper I have also tried to find out those reasons for which implementation failed at ground level and tried to find out the causes of high dropout rates among socio-economically disadvantaged students in higher education.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Both state government and central government have taken several initiatives for the expansion of gross enrolment in higher education as well as to provide quality education to students coming from all sections of society. Fastest growth have experienced in education in terms of gross enrolment in higher education for last two decades (see table 1) but after 73 years of independence government has failed to provide quality and inclusive education for all section of society due to proper implementation of various initiatives taken in last two five

years plan and large number of seats in higher education reserved for socially disadvantaged students remain vacant (Planning Commission, GOI, 2013, p. 102).

Today India is one of the fastest growing nations in the world but to make it a developed nation growth in higher education is utmost need in the present scenario. Fullest expansion of higher education will make the provision of highest level of growth and development of human resource which is very important for the development of a nation (Abdul Salim, 2004) and fullest expansion of education will only be possible when all section of society will actively participate in higher education.

Therefore opportunity to access and achieve higher education for all segment of society including the people of disadvantaged group is a need for the development of our nation. Human capital theory shows that investment in higher education accelerates the process and rate of economic growth (Tilak & Choudhury, *Inequality in Access to Higher Education in India between the Poor and the Rich: Evidence from NSSO Data, 2019*) and higher education plays an important role in total development of a nation (Tilak, 2003).

Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the founder of Indian Higher education, realised the necessity of higher education to make a country stable. The chairman of Kothari commission D.S. Kothari stated that there is a symbiotic relationship between education and national development (UGC, 2011, p. 08).

Fullest utilisation of human resource capital is needed to develop our nation and to become a developed nation but it is only possible through equity and justice principal in higher education (MHRD, 2020). For better functioning of higher education in national development, representation from all sections and segments of society is needed. In 12<sup>th</sup> FYP emphasis was given on inclusiveness of Higher education so that more students from marginalised section can be accommodated in higher education. Apart from that in twelfth five year plan emphasis was also given to elimination of gender disparity and reducing rural urban, inter regional and inter social group disparities (UGC, 2011, p. 32). But disparity between poor and non-poor and between different social groups still persists in accessing higher education in India particularly in rural areas (Thorat, 2016).

It is observed from various data that in higher education small percentage of students are coming from SC, ST categories which proves that backwardness in higher education still persist. According to NSS data 64<sup>th</sup> round 2007-08 total number of SC student in higher education was 24.86 lakh, ST student was 6.52 lakh, OBC student was 65.99 lakh and others 88.87 lakh as against the total number of students in higher education was 1.86 crore i.e 18.62 million which increases to 37.4 million or 3.74 crore in 2018-19. As per AISHE report 2018-19 total number of SC student in Indian Higher education is 55.67 lakh while ST students comprises of 20.67 lakh and OBC students were 135.92 lakh i.e. 1.36 crore.

Improvement has been observed in terms of accessing higher education for SC, ST and OBC groups but participation percentage in higher education is not the only parameter to declare it as progress in higher education rather we should observe the achievement rate to fine out the real picture of higher education in India (see table 2). Achievement in higher education has not yielded satisfactory results. However, it is true that today India becomes one of the largest systems of higher education in the world and it is the second largest after China (Tilak & Choudhury, 2019).

**Table 1: Enrolment in Higher Education 2010 to 2020 (In Lakh)**

YEAR	STATE	ALL CATEGORY			SC		ST		OBC	
		MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	MALE	TOTAL	MALE	TOTAL	MALE	TOTAL
2010-11	WB	7.6	5.6	13.23	1	1.7	0.2	0.34	0.34	0.58
	INDIA	154.7	120.33	274.99	17.25	30.45	6.88	12.08	41.73	75.82
2012-13	WB	9.39	7.19	16.59	1.61	2.76	0.28	0.48	0.58	0.98
	INDIA	166.2	135.35	301.52	21.19	38.47	7.32	13.2	50.99	94.16
2014-15	WB	10.36	8.64	19	1.93	3.41	0.36	0.64	0.95	1.66
	INDIA	184.9	157.23	342.11	25.04	46.06	8.94	16.41	60.2	112.6
2017-18	WB	10.61	9.74	20.35	1.94	3.66	0.34	0.65	1.62	3
	INDIA	192	174.37	366.42	27.75	52.8	10.01	19.13	66.88	128.3
2018-19	WB	10.56	10.4	20.97	1.91	3.74	0.34	0.67	1.64	3.16
	INDIA	192.1	181.89	373.99	28.35	55.67	10.52	20.67	69.01	135.9
2019-20	WB	10.69	10.91	21.6	1.98	3.96	0.36	0.72	1.7	3.39
	INDIA	196.4	188.92	385.36	28.54	56.57	10.72	21.56	72.02	142.5

Source: AISHE Reports 2010-11,12-13,14-15,17-18,18-19,19-20

Many studies have been done on the inequalities in higher education and it was found from these studies that participation of scheduled caste and scheduled tribe in higher education improved overtime but in comparison to non-scheduled student participation it was not very satisfactory. In a study conducted by Basant and Sen in 2014 it was observed that Hindu upper caste students had higher probability in accessing higher education (Tilak & Choudhury, 2019). It was also argued in a study that social backwardness of these groups actually leads towards educational backwardness (Wankhede, 2016).

Differences have been found between students of rural and urban areas due to differences of opportunities. It has also been found in many studies that socio-economically disadvantaged students of rural areas have suffered more in accessing higher education due to lack of choices they have (Tilak & Choudhury, 2019). Some studies have also shown that there are other factors also which have influenced access to higher education such as location, occupation of parents, economic status of households, educational level of the parents, household size, and types of institutions etc. (Tilak & Choudhury, 2019). It was concluded in a study that in accessing higher education inequality between rich and poor are highest and it has the tendency of increasing inequality with the expansion of higher education in India (Tilak & Choudhury, 2019).

**Table 2: Enrolment of Regular students and pass out at UG Level in Lakh**

Year	State	Regular Enrolment in UG			Pass out Students		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2019-20	WB	7.92	8.75	16.68	1.45	1.57	3.02
	INDIA	138.17	139.11	277.29	30.99	35.5	66.5
2018-19	WB	7.76	8.27	16.03	1.29	1.41	2.7
	INDIA	135.8	135.4	271.3	30.4	34.3	64.7
2017-18	WB	7.79	7.92	15.72	1.38	1.43	28.18
	INDIA	134.8	129.7	264.6	30.67	33.52	64.19
2015-16	WB	8.19	7.22	15.41	1.4	1.33	27.4
	INDIA	131.89	117.31	249.21	31.28	32.03	63.31

Source: AISHE Data 2015-16,17-18,18-19 and 19-20

## 2.1. Operational Definition of Socio-economically disadvantaged group

It is actually a combination of socially and economically disadvantaged group of people. In this research I have used the term socio-economically disadvantage group to denote those students who belongs to either socially or economically disadvantaged sections of society. Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Class (OBC), minorities and also some non-scheduled students who are economically backward are included in this group.

## 2.2. Statement of the Problem

In this 21<sup>st</sup> century it is normal in all over India that students of socially disadvantaged group like a SC, ST, OBC, minorities and also some general students who are economically backward are coming to higher education due to various initiatives and financial assistance scheme launched by the government in last few decades. West Bengal is no exception in this respect. West Bengal launched new scheme 'Kanyashree' in 2017 and now it is very popular to girl students for its attractive scholarship amount paid at the end of continuous 18 years of education.

To get the benefit of Kanyashree i.e. K2 scholarship, huge number of girl students are enrolled in higher education in West Bengal. Girl students of socio-economically disadvantaged section are very much helpful for this scholarship. But it is also observed from various official records and in literature that these students who are coming from the bottom of our socio-economic ladder are facing some problem in achieving higher education and therefore challenges remain to include these sections of society into higher education. However, we have observed steady growth in gross enrollment in higher education in last two decades.

In this paper I have identified three major objectives of this research to make a concrete conclusion about the problem of achieving higher education for socio-economically disadvantaged groups in rural Bengal. I have set these objectives because these are the main focus of analysis from the focal point of this research. But I do also admit that within a societal framework one cannot identify any single cause for any social problem rather many causes are intrinsically interrelated with each other and produces a complex social problem and sometimes manifested in a different form. Keeping in mind about the problem of achieving higher education in India due to unequal access to higher education, I have tried to find out the main reason of the problem from grass root in rural Bengal. Study has been carried out with the following objectives –

## 3. OBJECTIVES

1. Identifying the problem of achieving higher education for students who are coming from socially as well as economically backward section of society.
2. To identify gaps between various initiatives taken by the government and problem of implementation.
3. To find out the reasons behind high dropout rates among students of marginalised section of society after getting admission to higher education.

### 3.1. Research Questions

The central research question I have identified here is the problem of unequal access to higher education for students of socio-economically disadvantaged group.

To find out the answer of the central research question I have set three different but interrelated questions here.

1. Is economic barrier the main obstacle to achieve higher education for students belonging to backward section of society?
2. What kind of social barriers do poor and marginal students face in achieving higher education?
3. What are the reasons behind their withdrawal from higher education?

Answer to these three questions may lead us to identify the problem of inequality in accessing and achieving higher education for socio-economically disadvantaged student in rural Bengal.

### **3.2. Parameters attached with research objectives**

Researcher has set some parameters here to understand the subject from broader perspective of sociology. As the subject matter of the study is very complex and depends on some other issues, I had to apply sociological understanding to overcome the complexity and make a clear-cut conclusion.

Parameters were set because achieving and accessing higher education is not same and both have dependency on some other aspects and issues related to society. To identify those aspects and issues, I have set some parameters by which the problem can be understood well.

Parameters used in this research are –

1. Economic status of the family
2. Social status of the family
3. Educational status of family
4. Gender difference and gender role
5. Caste and its influence
6. Inequality
7. Deprivation
8. Culture of poverty
9. Role of adult boys and girls
10. Capability of understanding the subject
11. Lack of educational efficiency needed for higher education
12. Environmental constraints

### **3.3. Area of Research**

The present research has been conducted in West Bengal and the researcher has taken two different govt. aided rural colleges<sup>1</sup> of two different district of West Bengal purposively to find out the main problem of socio-economically disadvantaged students in accessing and achieving higher education in Rural Bengal.



#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research mixed research methods<sup>ii</sup> has been applied to study the subject of research and to find out the genealogical route of the problem. For collecting primary data from the field both qualitative and quantitative methods have been applied because of the complexity of the problem. General survey method was applied to collect quantitative data from the respondents selected through sampling technique. In-depth interview were carried out for selected samples only to find out the root cause of the problem. 20 such interviews were conducted purposively to get valuable qualitative data about the research problem. 300 samples were taken equally from two different colleges by using purposive sampling tool. Students who were economically unstable or coming from socio-economically disadvantaged group were given the chance of being selected as respondent in this research.

Apart from that researcher's own observation and understanding gathered during in-depth interviews was also used in this research. As the research problem is very complex in nature the researcher has given emphasis on in-depth understanding of the problem. Descriptive statistics has also been used for analysis of quantitative data collected from the field. Secondary data have also been used in this research to make a comparative analysis and to increase the reliability and validity of the research.

Tools used: Questionnaire, Interview Schedule, In-depth Interview.

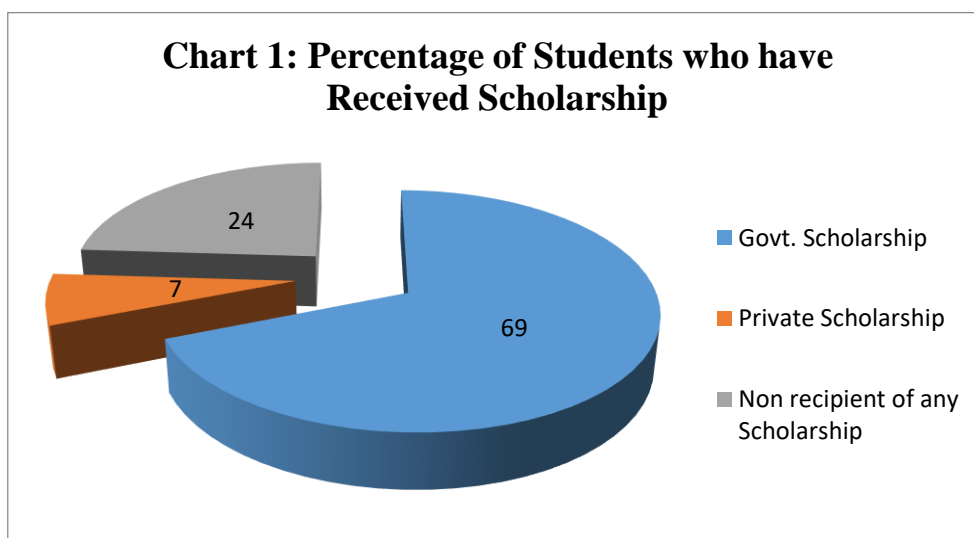
#### 5. FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

After processing of quantitative data collected from 300 respondents of two different colleges, it is observed that 52 percent respondents belong to 18- 20 age group and rest are above 21 years. Out of total respondents, 61 percent are female and 39 % are male.

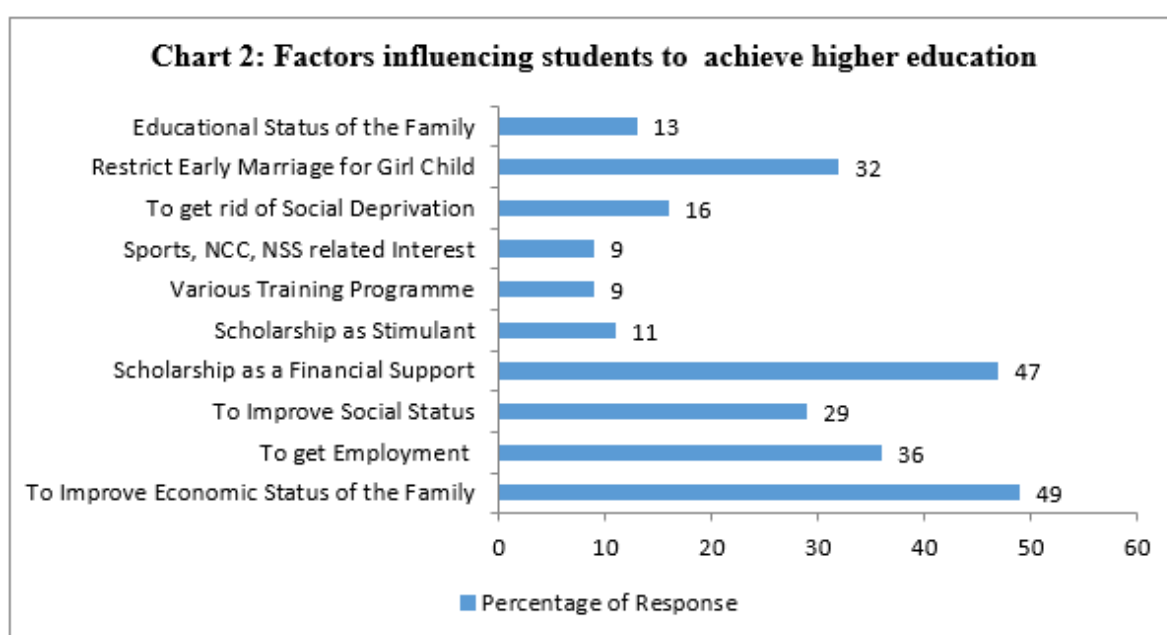
In connection with the question of economic condition of their family, 14 per cent respondents have said that their economic condition is very bad and unstable and another 27 per cent respondents have said that their economic condition is bad. 59 per cent respondents have said that their economic condition is not very bad but cannot be marked as stable.

It is observed from the data collected for this research that family support is very vital for achieving higher education. Out of total respondents 84 per cent have given their consent in favour of family support and out of total respondents 22 per cent have said that they have been inspired by teachers of their last attended schools. But interestingly respondents have given less importance to the peer group for achieving higher education. Only 10 per cent students have given their consent in favour of the importance of peer group. Researcher has come to know at the time of in-depth interview that instead of inspiring students to achieve higher education, some families of rural backward society de-motivate them and at the same time induce them to accept caste based traditional occupation. Students of such poor families have to give up their education at the cost of their family.

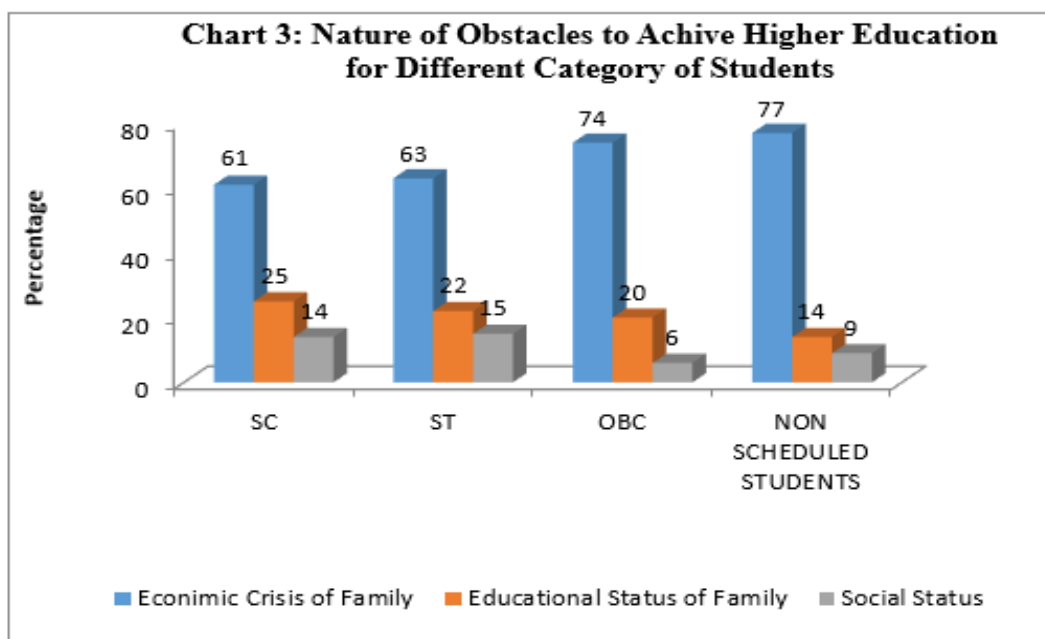
It is also found from the responses, collected through quantitative techniques, that students are entered in the field of higher education to change the economic status of their family and to make themselves economically self-sufficient (49 %). They have in mind also that higher education will give them employment opportunities (36 %). It is also important to note that 76 per cent respondents have received scholarship either from government or private sources but most of the students do not think that scholarship has much influence in entering into higher education rather it is a kind of financial support which helped them in pursuing the course.



Findings also shows that maximum number of respondents have received scholarship from government sources for achieving higher education. It is also interesting to note that most of the respondents have rejected the idea that scholarship as a stimulant for them to enter into the field of higher education but at the same time they admit that scholarship is important for students of economically backward section of society because it helps students financially to carry out their courses. From chart 2 it is also observed that 49 per cent student respondents have said that they have come to the field of higher education to uplift economic condition of their family while 36 per cent students have expressed their views in favour of employment generation capacity attached with higher education and 29 percent students preferred to achieve higher education for establishing their social status. 32 per cent students have given their consent in favour of the capacity of higher education to restrict early marriage of girl students. In-depth interviews reveal that girl students prefer to enter into higher education for escaping their early marriage and to establish themselves in wider field of economic activities with a view to economic empowerment.







It is understood from chart 3 that maximum respondents argued that economic crisis of the family is the main obstacle for achieving higher education for socio-economically disadvantaged children. It is also revealed from chart 3 that most of the OBC and Non-scheduled students do not think that social status can made any obstacles to achieve higher education. Only 6% and 9% responses were given by OBC and non-scheduled students in connection with the issue of social status.

## 6. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

After analysing the data collected from both qualitative and quantitative process as well as observation made by the researcher it is understood that students of socio-economically disadvantaged groups face many obstacles in achieving higher education. One of the major problems of these socio-economically disadvantaged students is economic crisis of the family and lack of family support.

From in-depth interview it is understood that few students of these rural poor families get little or no encouragement from their families due to lack of consciousness and awareness of their parents because of poor level of education. It is observed during face to face interview process that these poor people survive with their culture of poverty and try to stay alive with it.

These rural poor people are grabbed by traditional mentality and do not have any willingness to accept modern thinking, education and culture. It is also understood from my own observation that few poor people are very rigid and not willing to understand the positive effect of higher education. For them higher education is responsible for prevalence of romantic marriage and destruction of traditional system. Few respondents have said that they have lack of faith on higher education because on the one hand employment is uncertain after acquiring higher education and on the other it has negative impact on traditional occupation because higher education creates a kind of false image of social status which may restrict their children from taking traditional occupations due to delusion of such social status.

It has also been observed that caste system plays a vital role and rural poor families do not think anything outside the existing socio-cultural traditions. Early marriage still persists for both boys and girls in rural Bengal. It has been observed during the interview process that most of the rural poor people force their children to get marry after attaining the legal age at marriage. I have come to know from few girl students that their marriage has been deferred for getting Kanyashree Scholarship only. However, some of them get married after receiving the scholarship and forgo their higher education.

Apart from economic status and social status of the family, there are numerous other factors which have affected higher education of poor students in rural Bengal. It is also understood through various data collected from the field that educational status of the family is also an important factor responsible for unequal access of higher education for rural poor students.

It has been argued by most of the students that they have entered into the field of higher education for their personal interest, their personal dream of getting higher education and dream for economic stability. However, after a certain period time they relinquish higher education due to several reasons such as economic crisis of the family, marriage of the girl child, and many more. But apart from these reasons there are some personal reasons also for dropout from higher education. Lack of understanding capability and educational efficiency needed for higher education is also an important factor for their failure. To overcome the problem of educational efficiency needed for higher education proper long term planning is needed from school level which may increase their educational efficacy.

I also have observed that in few cases environmental constrains or situational factors hamper higher education of these poor disadvantaged rural students. At the time of face to face interview I have observed that most of the students have no separate study room, even study table or any book selves, for storing their books. On the basis of my own observation I understood that their life style, habits, way of life and social environment have negatively affected their thoughts for achieving higher education. In a face to face interview it has been observed that few students coming from Bauri community forgo their education at early age because of their socio-cultural and environmental situation.

It is my own understanding that as these students have grown up in a separate culture where maximum boys and girls give up their education at early age and take different types of occupation or domestic and agricultural work it is very difficult for some students to get higher education by freeing themselves from the shackles of culture and environmental constrain. Therefore it can be said that the life style, habits, way of life and the social environmental conditions of poor rural families which have been practiced for long time are the main constraint for achieving higher education. They are enjoying the culture of poverty due to their ignorance and accept the condition of life as their fate. This poor people are still governed by social customs, religion and caste system.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Present study reveals that the main obstacles of achieving higher education for socio-economically disadvantaged students of rural society is the economic crisis of the family and lack of awareness of the family members about the effectiveness and usefulness of education in present day society. Their own habits and lifestyle also create problems for achieving higher education. From the study it is understood that family played a vital role for achieving higher

education but students of economically disadvantaged section face enormous problem in achieving higher education as they do not get adequate support from their family. Most of the students are first generation learner of higher education therefore they do not get any kind of educational help from their family and many times distracted from the mainstream path of education due to social environment.

They receive scholarship from various agencies but with that small amount of scholarship they are unable to manage all requirements of higher education and ultimately they give up their dreams for higher education in the middle of their journey. After analysing every qualitative and quantitative data, I have come to the conclusion that although various initiatives have been taken during last two five year plan challenges remain for socio-economically disadvantaged students to achieve higher education. Government have taken various initiatives to tackle down the problem of economic crisis for these destitute students by giving several forms of scholarship but it is understood that these little amounts of scholarship are not sufficient to mitigate the economic crisis of the family.

The most vital reason is the economic crisis of their family but it is not the only reason for their backwardness. There are many other reasons which create obstacles to achieve higher education for these backward sections of society. Their own problem of understanding ability, problem of coping up with educational environment of the higher education system, lack of educational quality needed for higher education, drawbacks in previous education, lack of willingness to achieve higher education, family pressure for accepting early marriage for girl students, lack of aspiration for achieving higher education, social and environmental problem within and outside the family and above all the problem of teaching learning method adopted at different higher education institutions are also responsible for the said problem.

Historically it is found that higher education in India was under the control of upper caste and elite people for long time. From that point of view the present participation rate of disadvantaged group in higher education is not very unsatisfactory because within a few decades after independence India has able to include moderate percentage of socio-economically disadvantaged students in higher education. To make it more fruitful, attractive financial support should be formulated for needy and meritorious students belonging to SC, ST, OBC and other disadvantaged group who are coming from destitute families of our society. To improve the achievement capacity of these socio-economically disadvantaged students strengthening measures should be taken to improve their educational adaptability which will reduce dropout rates and increase achievement rate in higher education.

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