

The Role of Education in the Empowerment of Toto Tribal Women in India: PRISMA-Based Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: *The role of education in empowerment of Toto tribal women in India is explored systematically in the light of socio-economic empowerment, decision making, health awareness and social participation and obstacles that influence the education of women. The study focuses on the scanty and disjointed evidence on the role of education in the meaningful empowerment of the Toto community, one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is performed using Google Scholar and JSTOR, ERIC, and official sources as the search engines, with literature published from 2000 to 2025. 85 records were first identified of which 42 survived initial screening and 18 records were included in the final thematic synthesis. The results show that education has a positive impact in enhancing awareness, aspirations, agency, social participation and access to broader opportunities of tribal women. But it also has an empowering potential, which is influenced by poverty, geographical isolation, language barriers, lack of educational infrastructure, gender based expectations and low institutional support. It also finds that the direct evidence connecting education and women empowerment of the Toto in socio-economic, decision-making, health awareness and social participation are still scarce. The study thus not only emphasises the importance of accessing education, but also of how education is lived and negotiated for meaningful empowerment in the socio-cultural space of the Toto community.*

Keywords: Education, Women Empowerment, National Development, Toto Tribal Women, Prisma-Based Study.

INTRODUCTION

Education is recognised as playing a key role in social development, social inclusion and empowerment, especially of historically marginalised communities. Among the tribal communities in India, education means more than literacy and formal education; it shapes perceptions and social engagement, drives economic opportunities, and empowers agency. Nevertheless, the educational disadvantages of tribal communities are still due to poverty, geographical isolation, lack of infrastructure, socio-cultural constraints, language barrier and lack of institutional support. These challenges can be particularly significant for tribal girls and women, where gender and socio-economic disadvantages often intersect (Chowdhury et al., 2022; Thamminaina et al., 2020). Literature identified that education can play a role in raising awareness, aspirations, decision making, economic participation and social participation among tribal women (Padmavathi & Rama Devi, 2024; Sharma, 2025). However, education does not automatically bring empowerment; the effects of education rely on the quality and continuity of education, family and community support, socio-economic conditions, cultural expectations and institutional accessibility. In this context, the Toto community of Alipurduar district of West Bengal is a significant and relatively un-studied case. The Toto community is a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) with unique socio-cultural and linguistic identity, faces difficulties in education and socio-cultural development due to family conditions, economic conditions, language, infrastructure and other social changes (Upadhyay et al., 2021; Saha & Banerjee, 2025). But there is still unclear evidence of how exactly education is linked to Toto women's empowerment. Hence, this study attempts to conduct a PRISMA based systematic review to synthesize the available evidence on education and toto women empowerment in the context of socio-economic empowerment, decision making, health awareness, social participation and the barriers influencing educational experiences of Toto women.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to systematically synthesize published research related to the role of education in the empowerment of women Toto tribe of India. In particular, the literature on access to education and engagement with education, including the reported barriers and limitations in the literature, will be examined in relation to socio-economic empowerment, their decision-making ability, health awareness, and social life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study takes the help of PRISMA framework to systematically review the existing literature on the role education play in empowering tribal women with special reference to Toto tribal women in India. A structured search of academic databases like Google Scholar, JSTOR,

ERIC and Government reports was undertaken using keywords like “tribal women education”, “Toto tribe”, “women empowerment”, “PVTGs in India” and so on. The initial search came up with 85 studies. After the removal of duplicates and irrelevant records, 42 studies were screened according to the titles and abstracts. Out of these, 25 studies were evaluated against the eligibility criteria by full-text review and finally, 18 studies were included for in-depth analysis.

Recent studies have also raised the issue of the economic role of education in empowering the tribal women. Tudu, Khatua and Panda (2025) found that education, vocational training, and economic resources significantly affect the level of empowerment among tribal women in Odisha. The study concluded that education is an important determinant of socio-economic independence and better livelihood chances.

Rasool and Vyas (2025) investigated tribal welfare policies in Jammu and Kashmir. They noted that educational policies, coupled with the self-help group program, improve financial independence and community participation among tribal women.

Another study by Bhutia and Kocherla (2025) further examined the efficacy of government schemes in ensuring tribal women's education and found that awareness of welfare schemes and access to digital resources have significantly contributed to literacy and empowerment outcomes. However, socio-cultural barriers and domestic responsibilities still limit participation. The reviewed literature consistently indicates the role of education as an important factor in improving the socio-economic and psychological empowerment of the tribal women.

Kujur and Kujur (2018) looked into the educational status of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups and concluded that low literacy rates among tribal women are closely linked with poverty, migration and lack of institutional support. The research highlighted that education can play a very important role in increasing social participation as well as reduce the cases of marginalization.

Das and Rai (2020) has investigated the nature of the relationship between education and women's empowerment in tribal communities and has shown that educated women exhibit a higher level of decision-making power, economic independence, and awareness of rights. Their findings indicate that education plays a role in the empowerment of individuals and groups.

Sharma (2016) in a doctoral study studied the role of psychological factors namely self-esteem, achievement motivation towards academic performance. Although not specifically focusing on tribal women, the study has shown that education helps to increase self-confidence and motivation, which are an essential part of empowerment.

Sarkar (2014) discussed the effect of literacy on the empowerment of tribal women. He found that education gives women the confidence and ability to engage in social and economic activities. The same study also found that educated tribal women were more likely to fight for children's education and better healthcare.

Sujatha (2012) on tribal education in India spoke volumes: access to quality education for tribal girls remains uneven. The researcher also argued that language barriers, lack of good school facilities and shortage of teachers contribute to the low educational attainment of tribal women.

Research by Mitra and Singh (2011) identifies education as a transformative element in improving the social position of tribal women by enhancing their participation in decision-making processes within their families and communities. The study concluded that literacy increases awareness regarding health, rights and livelihood opportunities.

Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008) analysed educational policies for marginalised communities. They found that the dropout rate among tribal girls has increased due to socio-economic constraints, early marriage, and a lack of culturally relevant curriculum. The authors suggested that targeted educational interventions are needed to empower the tribal women.

Similarly, Xaxa (2004) analysed tribal education in India and found that educational access among the tribal population remained far lower than that of other social groups. The study stressed that the absence of infrastructure, poverty and geographical isolation are the major barriers affecting the participation of tribal women in education.

Nambissan (2000) argued that education is a key factor in improving the socio-economic status of tribal communities and reducing gender inequalities. The study noted that the increase in literacy among tribal women plays a vital role in improving family welfare and participation in community Development.

Government reports on PVTGs (2014) show that communities such as the Toto tribe are extremely educationally deprived due to geographical isolation, poor infrastructure and socio-cultural barriers. These reports have brought the need for specific educational policies to correct gender disparities to the forefront.

Sen (1999) conceptualised development as freedom and emphasised on the expansion of the capabilities and choices of individuals through education. This theoretical perspective lends support to the argument that education is basic to the empowerment of the marginalized groups, among which are tribal women.

UNESCO (2015) reports further re-enforce that education promotes gender equality, better health awareness, and economic participation especially among women globally, including the indigenous population.

Finally, larger studies on educational inequality in India highlight the importance of improving women's education to reduce rural-urban inequalities and underscore its role in social Development. Research has shown that

improving female literacy and delaying early marriage significantly impact educational attainment and empowerment outcomes for rural women.

A critical gap which could be identified in literature is the absence of focused studies on Toto tribal women in particular. Most research focuses on tribal women in general or other PVTGs and this leads to difficulty in drawing specific conclusions for the respective community. Therefore, there is a need for local and more in-depth studies that look into the unique socio-cultural context of the Toto tribe.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Review Approach

The study used a PRISMA-based systematic literature review to synthesise published evidence on the role of education in empowering Toto tribal women in India.

The review followed the major stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion recommended by PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021). As the study relied exclusively on published and publicly available sources, no primary field data were collected.

Search Strategy and Information Sources

Through an internet search, Google Scholar, JSTOR and ERIC, literature on the topic of tribal women's education and empowerment and PVTG communities in India was systematically searched and relevant government and official reports were also consulted. The key words used were Toto tribe, tribal women education, women empowerment, PVTG education in India. These keywords were searched as single and multiple to uncover studies relevant to the aim of the review. Literature from 2000 to 2025 was included in the search to ensure that both foundational and recent evidence was included in the review.

Table 1. Search Strategy and Eligibility Criteria of the Systematic Review

Methodological component	Description
Review design	PRISMA 2020-based systematic literature review
Review focus	Role of education in the empowerment of Toto tribal women in India
Information sources	Google Scholar, JSTOR, ERIC, and relevant government/official reports
Publication period	2000–2025
Primary search terms	“Toto tribe”, “tribal women education”, “women empowerment”, and “PVTG education in India”
Search strategy	Keywords were searched individually and in relevant combinations to identify literature related to tribal women's education, empowerment, and PVTG communities in India.
Population or context of interest	Toto tribal women and, where Toto-specific evidence was limited, women belonging to other PVTG/tribal communities in India
Study types	Qualitative and quantitative empirical studies
Inclusion criteria	Studies published between 2000 and 2025 addressing tribal women's education, educational participation, empowerment, or related socio-economic and educational issues, with particular relevance to Toto or other PVTG communities in India.
Exclusion criteria	Duplicate records, studies unrelated to the review objectives, and sources without sufficient empirical evidence relevant to education and empowerment.
Initial records identified	85
Records retained after initial screening/duplicate removal	42
Studies included in final synthesis	18
Data extracted	Author/year, study context, research approach, participants/population, major findings, educational barriers, and evidence related to women's empowerment
Synthesis method	Thematic synthesis
Thematic analysis	Initial coding → grouping of similar codes → descriptive categories → higher-order themes → cross-study comparison
Primary field data	Not collected; the review is based on published/secondary evidence
Contextual case evidence	Relevant published Toto-specific case studies were used as secondary contextual evidence and were not treated as primary data of the present study.

Eligibility and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they focused on the education, educational participation, empowerment, and other related socio-economic and educational issues of tribal women; especially of the Toto community and other PVTG communities in India. To get a wider range of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative empirical studies were included. Studies were excluded if they did not meet the focus of the review, were duplicate records, or did not provide adequate empirical evidence related to education and empowerment. Where relevant contextual or policy evidence was available, this was used from government and official reports.

Study Selection Process

Selection of studies was done sequentially using PRISMA process. Originally 85 records were identified from the database and additional searches. Forty-two records were left for further screening after deduping. Titles and abstracts were compared to the predetermined inclusion criteria and the relevance and availability of empirical evidence were assessed. After the eligibility assessment, 18 studies were included and used for the final synthesis and analysis. The PRISMA flow diagram is provided to show the complete identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion process.

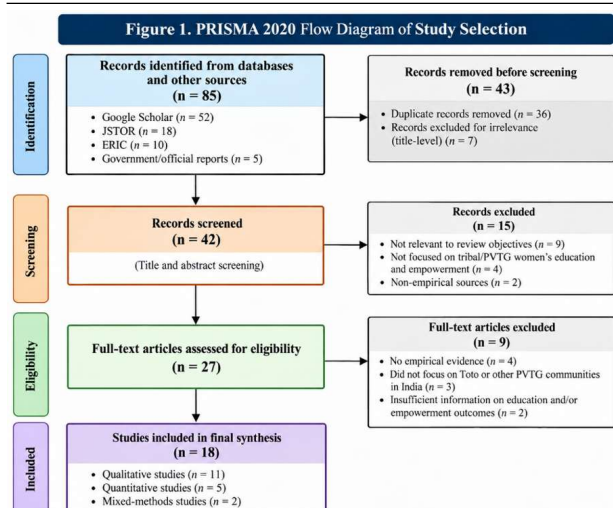


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process

Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

Systematic extraction of data was done on authorship, publication year, context of the study, population of the study, methodology, key findings, barriers to education and evidence of women's empowerment. The analysis process included the initial coding of relevant findings, grouping of similar ideas into descriptive categories and the creation of broader themes with each study compared and contrasted back and forth. These areas of convergence and divergence were then explored in the synthesis, alongside socio-economic, cultural, linguistic and institutional contexts that impact educational experiences. Through this process a more critical interpretation on how education can help in empowering women and limitations and gaps in existing Toto-specific evidence were identified.

Table 2. Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis Framework

Stage	Procedure followed in the present review	Purpose
1. Data extraction	Relevant information was extracted from each included study, including author/year, context, methodology, participants, major findings, educational barriers and empowerment-related evidence.	To organise evidence systematically
2. Initial coding	Findings relevant to education and women's empowerment were identified and assigned preliminary codes.	To identify recurring concepts
3. Categorisation	Similar codes were grouped into descriptive categories.	To organise conceptually related findings
4. Theme development	Related categories were compared and integrated into broader analytical themes.	To develop higher-order themes
5. Cross-study comparison	Findings were compared across the 18 included studies to identify similarities, differences, convergence and divergence.	To synthesise the evidence
6. Gap identification	Areas with limited, inconsistent or insufficient evidence were identified.	To establish research gaps
7. Contextual interpretation	Toto-specific published case studies were considered alongside broader tribal/PVTG evidence to interpret community-specific patterns.	To provide contextual understanding without introducing primary field data

Quality and Citation Cross-Checking

The bibliographic information of the included studies was verified on the available source information to increase the reliability and transparency of the review. We checked author names, publication years, article titles, journal information, and DOIs, if available. Besides, we also checked in-text citations with the reference list to ensure that they are consistent and there are zero citation and referencing errors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Education as a Pathway to Empowerment

Empowerment through Education Literatures reviewed show that education plays a significant role in the empowerment of tribal women and is a good tool to increase their awareness, participation in the society and economic empowerment and empowerment of individual woman. But knowledge does not necessarily empower people. Its contribution relies upon socio-economic conditions, family support, cultural expectations, institutional accessibility and continuity and quality of educational opportunities. So education should not only be interpreted as an independent determinant of empowerment but also as a facilitating factor.

Education and Socio-economic Empowerment

The literature indicates that education has the potential to improve women's awareness, aspirations, knowledge and access to broader economic and social opportunities. In the Toto context, there is a high level of educational awareness as well as poverty, livelihood constraints, geographical remoteness and limited opportunities. Thus, there is no direct relationship between education and economic independence. The ability of education to empower hinges on whether education opportunities can be translated into economic engagement, access to resources and increased autonomy in daily life.

Education and Decision-making

Learning can empower women's self-confidence, awareness, access to information and ability to make decisions at the household and community level. Yet, information regarding the decision making power of Toto women is still scarce. Much of the current literature on Totos has been on educational development, socio-cultural change and the problems at the community level, not specifically on women's involvement in household-, economic and community decision-making. Hence, it can be said that the decision making potential is an outcome of education but the available evidence is not enough to prove that this is directly related to the Toto context.

Education, Health Awareness and Social Participation

Education can enhance women's health, rights, social institutions and opportunities. It can also promote extra-household involvement and enhance engagement with broader social institutions. But evidence of the direct link between women's education and health awareness and social participation is still patchy when it comes to Toto. This indicates that the empowering nature of education has not been analyzed in detail among Toto women in the context of the broader tribal literature, which does offer some clues.

Educational Barriers and the Limits of Empowerment

The review highlights poverty, geographical isolation, lack of educational facilities, language barriers, lack of institutional support, technological constraints and gendered expectations as key constraints to the empowering potential of education. These conditions impact access to education, participation in education, continuity of education, and utilization of educational opportunities. So even broadening access for education will not guarantee empowerment, which must also be accompanied by cultural sensitivity and by a proper social, institutional, and economic environment.

The qualitative synthesis reveals a nuanced link between education and women's empowerment, with empowerment being influenced by the means of and experiences with education. While there are studies on educational development and socio-cultural conditions that give some insights about Toto-specific educational issues, research evidence on the direct connection between education and socio-economic empowerment, decision-making, health awareness and social participation of Toto women are still limited and fragment. This space indicates the need for more empirical work that is specific to the context.

RECOMMENDATION

- Educational programmes for Toto women need to be concerned with enrolment as well as regular attendance, retention, completion and progression to higher levels of education.
- Schools should adopt culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices that engage in culturally responsive pedagogy to honour Toto language, traditions, and community knowledge in order to make education more meaningful and accessible.
- Linking education to vocational skills, digital literacy, financial awareness and livelihood support will enhance economic independence, all of which can be achieved through learning.
- There is a need to pay more attention towards the awareness of women on health, rights, government schemes and institutional opportunities, and provide platform for women's participation in decision making of households and communities.
- Future research needs to produce more field-based evidence to understand how education actually translates into socio-economic empowerment, decision making and health awareness and social participation in women's daily lives, specifically for the context of Toto.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review points out that education is an important pathway yet context dependent path for empowerment of Toto tribal women in India. Reviewed evidence indicates that education can be a powerful agent to enhance awareness, aspirations, agency, social participation, health awareness, decision making and access to broader socio-economic opportunities. But for many, education's transformative promise is undermined by ongoing structural and contextual challenges such as poverty, geographical isolation, language barriers, poor

educational infrastructure, gender roles and limited institutional support. The results show that, access to education alone will not guarantee empowerment unless it is ongoing, relevant, inclusive, and takes into consideration the socio-cultural realities of the Toto community. One of the key issues not addressed directly in the literature is the lack of direct evidence linking education to the socio-economic empowerment, decision-making, health awareness and social participation of Toto women. Future studies should hence produce context-specific empirical data to gain insights into the experience of education for Toto women, and how these can lead to significant shifts in their daily lives, agency and opportunities.

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