



# Inclusion in Question: A Field-Based Analysis of SDG Progress among the Asur Tribe in Jharkhand

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<p><b>Received</b> 18/06/2025</p> <p><b>Accepted</b> 22/06/2025</p> <p><b>Published</b> 09/07/2025</p>	<p><b>Abstract</b></p> <p><i>This research paper critically examines the impact of inclusive policies on the Asur tribe- an Indigenous and historically marginalized community in India. Despite policy frameworks that emphasize inclusivity and equity, significant gaps persist between policy intent and on-ground realities. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork and a qualitative research approach, the study integrates primary data collected through in-depth interviews with secondary data from governmental reports and academic literature. The findings highlight persistent inequities in areas such as healthcare, education, and access to entitlements. This paper underscores the need for a nuanced, context-sensitive implementation of inclusive policies to ensure that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reach the most vulnerable populations.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> <i>Asur Tribe, Social Inclusion, Ethnographic Research, Healthcare Access, Sustainable Development Goals</i></p>
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## Introduction

India's commitment to inclusive development is well-articulated through various policy documents, legal frameworks, and national narratives. The vision is of an equitable society where all citizens- irrespective of caste, ethnicity, religion, or gender- have equal access to rights and opportunities. However, the ground reality often contrasts with this ideal. This study explores the practical implications of such inclusive policies by focusing on the Asur tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) residing primarily in the Gumla district of Jharkhand. The Asurs, traditionally iron-smelters with references found in ancient texts like the Rigveda and Mahabharata, now face severe marginalization. As per the 2011 Census, their population stands at 22,459, with a literacy rate of just 46.9% (male: 58.0%, female: 35.4%).

Despite landmark initiatives such as the Right to Education Act (2009), National Curriculum Framework (2005), National Policy on Education (1986), and the New Education Policy (2020), the benefits often fail to reach tribal communities effectively. The Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs), especially the first five, also emphasize inclusion, yet the Asurs continue to be excluded from mainstream progress. Reports like the Xaxa Committee (2014) have further underscored the need for culturally sensitive, multilingual, and gender-inclusive education policies.

This paper critically assesses the gap between inclusive policy frameworks and their actual implementation, using the Asur tribe as a case study. It highlights how well-intended policies often fall short when confronted with on-the-ground complexities, ultimately questioning the efficacy of inclusion in India's development discourse.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To critically examine the implementation and effectiveness of inclusive development policies in the context of the Asur tribe, with a focus on education, healthcare, and social equity.
2. To analyse the gap between policy intent and ground-level realities by investigating the lived experiences of the Asur community in Gumla district, Jharkhand.

### **Methodology of the Study**

This study adopts an exploratory research design, centring on the Gumla district of Jharkhand, the primary habitat of the Asur tribe. A qualitative approach grounded in ethnographic methodology was used to gain in-depth insights into the dynamics of inclusive policy implementation. Data collection involved both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was obtained through semi-structured interviews and official records accessed from the District Collectorate in Gumla. Secondary data included the review of policy documents, government reports, and Census data. For analysis, the study employed thematic analysis alongside basic descriptive statistics, specifically percentage-based calculations, to interpret and present findings.

### **Results and Analysis**

#### ***Understanding the Policy Terrain***

The National Policy on Education (1986) emerged as a forward-looking framework aiming to bridge educational inequalities, particularly for tribal communities. It emphasized embracing India's cultural and linguistic diversity and acknowledged the educational disadvantages faced by Scheduled Tribes (STs), advocating inclusive strategies to close these gaps. Central to its vision was expanding access and reducing disparities, aligning with the nation's broader social and economic development goals.

However, in practice, the policy encountered numerous challenges in tribal areas. A significant concern was the disconnect between policy aspirations and their actual implementation. In many tribal regions of Jharkhand, including Asur-inhabited areas, educational infrastructure remains underdeveloped, with insufficient numbers of trained teachers and a general decline in educational quality. Although the policy recommended the use of tribal languages as mediums of instruction to promote cultural relevance, it lacked context-specific adaptability, often applying uniform strategies that did not reflect the diversity of tribal groups. Furthermore, its focus largely remained on primary and secondary education, leaving higher education and skill development underemphasized. It also failed to integrate land rights and traditional livelihoods—key to the

socio-cultural fabric of tribal communities—into the education discourse. While NPE 1986 laid foundational ideas for inclusive education, its limitations underscore the need for more nuanced and culturally rooted approaches.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 further advanced the call for inclusive, child-centered, and culturally responsive education. It highlighted the significance of multilingual education and encouraged using tribal languages to enhance accessibility and engagement. While its intent was to reduce learning barriers and accommodate local contexts, ground realities suggest that many of its goals remain unfulfilled, particularly in vulnerable communities like the Asur tribe of Gumla. Access to quality schooling, relevant curricula, and culturally sensitive pedagogy continues to be limited. Language barriers persist, with mainstream languages dominating the educational space, often alienating tribal learners. Teacher training remains inadequate for addressing the specific needs of tribal students, while socio-economic disadvantages further hinder participation in education and limit exposure to higher education or vocational opportunities.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 marked a major shift toward equitable education, guaranteeing free schooling for all children aged 6 to 14. Section 6 of the Act promotes the concept of "neighbourhood schools," emphasizing proximity to ensure access. However, in tribal belts like the Bishunpur block of Gumla, the idea of neighbourhood schools fails in execution. Many villages are situated over 10 kilometres away from the nearest school, a substantial barrier for children from the Asur tribe. With only 12 tribal residential schools in the entire district—four of which cater to girls—the scarcity of institutions significantly undermines RTE's inclusivity vision. Long travel distances and limited residential facilities lead to poor attendance and early dropouts, especially among girls, making the promise of accessible education an unfulfilled ideal.

The Xaxa Committee (2014), constituted to examine the socio-economic and educational status of tribal communities, identified critical barriers—such as lack of infrastructure, teacher shortages, and language disconnects. The committee advocated for multilingual, culturally grounded education, enhanced teacher training, scholarships, and better integration of healthcare with education to address interlinked deprivations. It also emphasized the involvement of tribal communities in policy planning and implementation to ensure more effective outcomes. Despite these insightful recommendations, little progress has been observed in areas like Gumla. The Asur tribe continues to grapple with poverty, isolation, and inadequate public services. A decade later, many of the report's key proposals remain unrealized on the ground, highlighting a persistent implementation deficit.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 brings renewed focus on equity and inclusion. It advocates instruction in the mother tongue or regional language up to Grade 5, promoting the preservation of tribal languages. It also encourages integrating indigenous knowledge into curricula, creating Special Education Zones in tribal-dominated regions, and enhancing community participation in school governance. The NEP stresses the importance of teacher preparation tailored to tribal contexts and pushes for greater representation of marginalized groups in higher education. Despite its ambitious vision, the success of NEP 2020 depends heavily on effective implementation, adequate funding, and strong collaboration between government bodies and tribal communities. For tribes like the Asur, whose realities are shaped by cultural specificity

and geographic isolation, translating this vision into tangible change will require sustained, context-sensitive, and community-driven efforts.

### ***Unveiling the Nexus: Sustainable Development Goals and Social Marginalization***

The initial five Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)- elimination of poverty, ending hunger, ensuring good health and well-being, providing quality education, and achieving gender equality- are fundamentally aligned with the ideals of social inclusion. These objectives act as vital benchmarks for assessing a community's dedication to inclusivity. When such goals remain unmet, it signals systemic exclusion, often rooted in socio-economic and structural inequities.

**Goal 1: No Poverty** – Persistent poverty is one of the starkest indicators of exclusion. It highlights how individuals or entire communities are deprived of access to fundamental economic opportunities and necessary resources, effectively pushing them to the peripheries of society.

**Goal 2: Zero Hunger** – The prevalence of hunger exemplifies exclusion from adequate, nutritious food—a primary human necessity. It reflects disparities in food security and signals unequal distribution of essential resources.

**Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being** – Disparities in healthcare access serve as a direct manifestation of exclusion. Marginalized populations often face systemic barriers that obstruct their access to timely, quality healthcare services, resulting in significant gaps in health outcomes.

**Goal 4: Quality Education** – Inequitable access to education is indicative of deep-rooted social inequality. When certain groups are denied quality education, they are also denied avenues for socio-economic mobility and personal development.

**Goal 5: Gender Equality** – Gender-based inequities represent a critical form of exclusion, where women and girls are routinely denied access to education, employment, and decision-making roles, entrenching their marginalization.

Failure to meet these core SDGs reveals entrenched social disparities and highlights the exclusion of particular communities from the broader development process. These unmet objectives make it imperative to confront inequality, eliminate discrimination, and dismantle systemic barriers. The overarching ethos of the SDGs- *leaving no one behind*- demands that development benefits be equitably shared across all societal segments.

Following semi-structured interviews conducted with 100 individuals (comprising 50 males and 50 females) from Jobhipat village in Bishunpur block, Gumla district, it became glaringly evident that the status of the first five SDGs among the Asur tribe is critically poor. The primary data revealed profound challenges in accessing even the most basic amenities. Respondents were questioned about family planning awareness, reliance on institutional healthcare versus traditional remedies, and personal hygiene practices such as regular bathing. The responses painted a troubling picture- showcasing minimal access to medical care, low awareness of hygiene norms, and erratic bathing habits caused by acute water scarcity. These findings reinforce the necessity of tailored interventions to bridge these socio-economic and healthcare gaps and align the community with sustainable development principles.

When respondents were asked about any perceptible improvements in employment opportunities or income generation within the community, the response was a unanimous and emphatic “No.” This was echoed when participants were queried about any changes in their household economic conditions or educational initiatives to combat poverty- again, the answer was consistently negative. These responses underscore a grim reality: despite existing welfare programs, the Asur tribe remains entrenched in social exclusion and far removed from the attainment of the SDGs relating to poverty eradication and hunger mitigation. To enable the Asur tribe to become empowered members of society, systemic barriers must be dismantled, and equitable access to essential services must be prioritized. Ensuring their inclusion in the development narrative is a crucial step toward realizing the comprehensive goals of sustainable development.

The evaluation of educational quality within the Asur tribal region revealed a discouraging situation, despite some minor improvements in literacy levels. In this area- served by three local schools- numerous obstacles remain. One school for girls offers classes only up to grade 6, thereby limiting continued education for young girls. To explore this further, focus group discussions were held with 33 teachers who shared their experiences and observations about the local educational landscape. The insights were disheartening. Many educators expressed dissatisfaction with their employment conditions and revealed a desire to leave due to several pressing issues. The absence of permanent staff, the reliance on contractual teachers, and irregular or delayed payment of salaries were commonly cited concerns that demoralize the teaching force and negatively impact the quality of instruction.

Moreover, the lack of essential services- such as electricity, drinking water, internet, and transportation- further discourages teachers from working in these isolated areas. The absence of nearby healthcare centres poses additional risks, as students and staff must travel considerable distances for medical treatment. Despite having sports equipment, the absence of proper playgrounds hinders students’ physical development. Residential school conditions are equally concerning, with many teachers commuting from faraway villages or living in substandard temporary shelters within the schools. Female students face heightened difficulties, particularly during menstruation, as there are no functioning toilets or water facilities, forcing them to resort to using cloth. These sanitary issues frequently result in health complications and high dropout rates among girls.

In conclusion, the prevailing state of education in these tribal schools is alarming. Both students and teachers, particularly females, face numerous challenges that affect learning quality and inhibit progress toward gender equity. Teachers have recommended a series of urgent reforms, such as the distribution of menstrual hygiene products, awareness programs on menstrual health, development of proper transportation systems, and construction of well-equipped hostels. Infrastructure improvement is a critical requirement if we are to enhance educational quality and promote genuine inclusivity within the Asur tribal community.

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

Although numerous policies and programs have been introduced with the aim of promoting tribal empowerment and inclusion, the harsh truth remains that many tribal groups- especially the Asur tribe- continue to endure deep-seated inequalities in contemporary society. These initiatives,

despite being well-crafted in theory, often fall short in their actual execution. For communities like the Asurs, these policies tend to remain confined to documentation, offering little by way of concrete, day-to-day improvements. Their ongoing struggle for dignified existence underscores the disappointing gap between policy promises and lived experiences. The initiatives meant to uplift these communities have not yet made a meaningful difference at the grassroots. This disconnects between conceptual policy frameworks and their real-world implementation calls for a more cohesive and committed effort to bridge the divide. The situation faced by the Asur tribe serves as a stark example that policies must be more than symbolic; they need to materialize into actionable outcomes that genuinely uplift marginalized populations.

The Asur community contends with a complex set of barriers that hinder their progress toward fulfilling the first five Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Inadequate communication systems and a lack of transportation cut them off from essential services and developmental opportunities. Access to clean water and proper sanitation is severely limited, leading to serious health concerns, particularly for women, many of whom remain uninformed about menstrual hygiene due to water scarcity. The prevalent practice of bathing on alternate days reflects the urgent need for improved water and sanitation infrastructure. Healthcare remains a major area of concern; with no nearby hospitals, individuals are left to depend on traditional or home-based remedies for even minor ailments. Moreover, early marriages—often a result of poor education and lack of awareness—continue to perpetuate socio-economic inequalities within the community.

The state of education within the Asur tribe is equally distressing. Inadequate school infrastructure and poor-quality education contribute to low student engagement and teacher dissatisfaction, severely affecting the academic atmosphere. Early pregnancies further obstruct the empowerment of young women, both physically and socio-economically. Education, being a cornerstone of empowerment and societal progress, should ideally serve as a vehicle for inclusivity. However, within Asur-dominated areas, the deep-rooted educational disparities become strikingly apparent. Primary data reveals high dropout rates, especially among girls. The shortage of schools, lack of proper facilities, and the unavailability of trained educators only worsen the educational crisis. The lone girls' school in the region, rather than being a pillar of empowerment, often fails to meet even basic educational standards. This perpetuates a damaging cycle of disinterest, academic disengagement, and social exclusion.

To effectively tackle these complex challenges and advance sustainable development within the Asur community, a comprehensive and integrated strategy is required. This should include robust infrastructure development, gender-sensitive and inclusive educational reforms, better access to healthcare, and grassroots-level awareness initiatives. Collaborative partnerships among government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities are essential to bridge existing gaps and facilitate the full participation of the Asur tribe in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Only through such inclusive and sustained efforts can we hope to secure a more just, equitable, and empowered future for this marginalized group.

## **Conclusion**

In spite of repeated assurances and commitments to uplift the Asur tribe, they continue to navigate a difficult journey, marked by a persistent lack of access to fundamental amenities and the unfulfilled promise of equality. The divide between the ideal of inclusive development and the

realities of their everyday struggles is painfully clear. Healthcare, often considered a key marker of inclusion, remains largely inaccessible to most Asur individuals. Similarly, education—which is widely regarded as a powerful tool for social mobility—encounters numerous obstacles within this community. Even the most basic infrastructural necessities, such as access to clean water and sanitation, remain largely unmet. Social inclusion, an essential element of a truly equitable society, still feels out of reach for the Asur tribe. There is an urgent need to launch more targeted and effective development programs that genuinely incorporate the Asur community into the broader fabric of an inclusive society. Despite the existence of multiple government-led initiatives, social exclusion continues to affect various aspects of their lives. Raising awareness and fostering greater understanding among the wider public about the Asur tribe’s unique culture, challenges, and needs is critical for bridging this gap and nurturing a more cohesive social environment. The Asur community in the Gumla district exemplifies a population that continues to struggle with basic services such as education, healthcare, clean water, transportation, and communication infrastructure. As the world progresses toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, it becomes increasingly vital to prioritize marginalized communities like the Asurs. Guaranteeing their access to quality education, medical care, and essential infrastructure is not only a fundamental human right but also a key move toward creating a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future for all.

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