



Breaking Barriers to Education:

Persistent Issue of Out-of-School Children in Keonjhar, Odisha

11
25

Pintu Paul



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. ABSTRACT	4
2. INTRODUCTION	5
3. DATA AND METHODS	6
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION	6
5. ASPIRE'S ROLE IN ADDRESSING OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN	8
6. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	9
7. REFERENCES	12

If you have any suggestions, or would like to contribute, please write to us at contact@sprf.in

© Social Policy Research Foundation™

NOVEMBER 2025

Issue Brief

Breaking Barriers to Education:

Persistent Issue of Out-of-School Children in Keonjhar, Odisha

Pintu Paul

Assistant Professor, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, India

*Corresponding author: Pintu Paul, PhD, 10, Institutional Area, Indian Social Institute, Lodi Road, New Delhi, 110003, India;

Email: pintupaul383@gmail.com

II ABSTRACT

Despite constitutional guarantees and targeted policies like the Right to Education (RTE) Act, a significant number of children in India remain out of school, either as dropouts or never enrolled, particularly among socioeconomically and geographically marginalised populations. This article examines the structural and socioeconomic factors that influence out-of-school children in Keonjhar district, Odisha, where tribal children face a significant hurdle in accessing education. Drawing on a comprehensive child census conducted across 11 blocks by Aspire, the study analyses data on over 278,000 children aged 6–17 years. Findings reveal that 9.2% of children in this age group are out of school, with the highest rates among Scheduled Tribes (STs), rural households, girls, and children of uneducated or poor parents. The article also highlights Aspire's multidimensional interventions, ranging from residential bridge courses to community engagement strategies, that aim to address this issue. The study underscores the need for infrastructural expansion, socio-cultural transformation, economic support, alternative learning pathways, and stronger public-private partnerships to achieve inclusive and equitable education in low-resource settings like Keonjhar.

Keywords: Out-of-school children, School dropout, Educational inequality, Tribal education, Right to Education (RTE), and Marginalised communities

II INTRODUCTION

Despite notable progress, India continues to struggle to achieve universal elementary education. The issue of out-of-school children, including dropouts and those never enrolled, remains a significant concern, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged groups and underdeveloped regions (Paul & Thapa, 2024). Educational access varies widely across states, with some experiencing significantly higher dropout rates than others. Odisha, in particular, has one of the highest dropout rates in India, especially among tribal children, many of whom are first-generation learners (Pattanaik, 2020).

Since independence, the Indian government has implemented several policies and programs to improve enrolment and access to education. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was launched in 2001-02 to achieve the universalisation of elementary education, bridge the gender gap, and reduce social disparities in educational attainment. The government of India further enacted the Right to Education (RTE) Act in 2009 to provide 'free and compulsory' education to all children aged between 6 and 14 years. Despite these initiatives by the state and central government, many children in Odisha have limited access to education, especially those belonging to marginalised tribal and poor families (Pattanaik, 2020).

This field-based study was conducted in Keonjhar, a district in Odisha with a predominantly tribal population. Children in this district face significant educational challenges. The district has witnessed low literacy and alarmingly high dropout rates. According to the 2011 census, Keonjhar's literacy rate is 68%, which is below the state average. According to UDISE (2021-22) data, the dropout rate at the upper primary level is 7.9%, which increases to 32.6% at the secondary level in Keonjhar. This article examines the structural determinants of out-of-school children. It further recommends key policy solutions to enhance educational access and retention, particularly among marginalised communities in Keonjhar, Odisha.

II DATA AND METHODS

Data were collected from a household survey conducted in 11 blocks of Keonjhar district, Odisha, by Aspire1 (A Society for Promotion of Inclusive and Relevant Education), in partnership with the Tata Steel Foundation, under the Education Signature Program—a joint initiative between Aspire and the Tata Steel Foundation. It is a child census covering all children (0-17 years) from every household in the study setting. A total of 4,05,117 children aged 0-17 years were enumerated in 11 blocks. Of them, 2,78,618 children belonged to the school-going age (6-17 years old). The purpose of the survey was to assess the educational status and well-being of children in the Keonjhar district.

The survey was conducted in two phases. The first phase was implemented between January and March 2020. As the Covid-19 pandemic hit, a nationwide lockdown was announced, and the survey was halted. In the second phase, we restarted our data collection in September 2021 and completed the survey in November 2021. In both survey rounds, households were asked a set of questions about their socio-economic status, the enrollment status of school-going children, the general well-being of the family, especially among children, and the Anganwadi status of younger non-school-going children. Additionally, questions were asked about parental education and other background characteristics. In the second round, households were also asked about children's access to educational activities during school closures.

A comprehensive mapping was conducted using the Census of India (2011) data for each household in all selected blocks. Initially, our monitoring staff visited the field, built rapport with stakeholders at various levels, and obtained formal permission from local government offices and leaders for the survey. Rigorous survey training was provided to all enumerators before conducting the survey. Data has been collected in digital mode through the Open Data Kit (ODK) application. Monitoring and tracking of the survey were performed by the monitoring team through the physical mode (through an interview tracking sheet). Every enumerator was required to fill out the interview tracking form for each household to track the positivity of missing households. Informed consent was taken from each participant before conducting the survey. Aspire ensured the anonymity of each respondent who participated in the survey. After collecting data from the field, we cleaned, organised, and structured the dataset for analysis purposes. All data were analysed in Stata software.

II RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of 278,618 children aged 6-17, 12,754 (9.2%) are out of school in 11 blocks of Keonjhar district, 6,840 (2.5%) are never enrolled, and 18,667 (6.7%) are dropouts. These rates are significantly varied across different blocks. Banspal block reported the highest proportion of out-of-school children, with 5.9% never enrolling and 13.5% dropping out of school. Similarly, dropout rates remained notably high in Telkoi at 8.8% and Ghatgaon at 7.9% (**Figure 1**).

I RURAL-URBAN AND GENDER DISPARITY

Significant disparities exist in school enrollment and dropout rates based on residence and gender. Children in rural areas face greater challenges accessing education than their urban counterparts. At the same time, gender norms and socioeconomic factors continue to shape educational opportunities differently for boys and girls. The proportion of out-of-school children is significantly higher in rural areas, with 2.5% never enrolling and 6.9% dropping out, compared to urban areas,

where the rates stand at 1.8% and 3.2%, respectively (Table 1). Limited access to well-equipped schools, inadequate infrastructure, and economic constraints contribute to these higher dropout rates in rural settings. Many boys in rural areas leave school early to support family farming and labour activities, further widening the educational gap between rural and urban children (PROBE, 1999).

Gender disparities in education reveal complex patterns. While boys exhibit a slightly higher overall dropout rate (7.4%) compared to girls (6%), the rate of never enrolment is higher among girls (2.6%) than boys (2.3%), particularly in rural areas (Figure 2). This can be attributed to sociocultural factors, including domestic responsibilities, restrictive gender norms, and early marriages, which often prevent girls from enrolling in or continuing their education (Paul & Thapa, 2024).

I CASTE AND RELIGION

Discrimination in access to education based on caste and religion remains a significant barrier, particularly for marginalized communities. Children from socially disadvantaged groups, such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), face systemic obstacles in accessing quality education. Children belonging to ST have the least access to education, with 3.6% never enrolled in school and 9.4% dropouts. Similarly, SC children experience disproportionately high dropout rates (5%), reflecting long-standing inequalities in educational opportunities.

Several studies in India confirm that children from SCs and STs are at a significantly higher risk of dropping out compared to their privileged-caste peers (Choudhury, 2006; Garg et al., 2023; Prakash et al., 2017). Compared to children from privileged castes, those from marginalized groups experience higher dropout rates due to socioeconomic disadvantages, exclusionary practices, and inadequate educational infrastructure.

Religious background also plays a crucial role in shaping educational access. Christian communities exhibit the highest proportion of out-of-school children, with 5.9% never enrolled and 13.7% dropping out. Additionally, dropout rates remain notably high among children from Sarna and Hindu religious groups (6.7%), indicating persistent socio-religious disparities in education (**Table 1**).

I PARENTAL EDUCATION

Parental education is a key factor in determining children's access to education. Educated parents are more likely to recognize the long-term benefits of schooling and prioritize their children's education (Drèze & Kingdon, 2001). Data indicate a strong negative correlation between parental educational attainment and dropout/non-enrolment. Children of parents with no formal education face significantly higher rates of being out of school, with never-enrolled and dropout rates exceeding 4% and 12%, respectively. In contrast, children whose parents have 11 or more years of education experience have dramatically lower out-of-school rates, at less than 2% (**Table 1**). Parental education serves as both a direct and indirect motivator. Educated parents can provide a conducive learning environment, ensure access to educational resources, and actively encourage their children to complete their schooling. However, parents tend to prioritise educating their sons over their daughters, irrespective of their educational level (Kugler & Kumar, 2017).

I HOUSEHOLD WEALTH

Economic constraints remain a significant barrier to school enrollment and retention, particularly among children from low-income households. Despite free elementary education in India, hidden costs—including tuition fees, books, and stationery—impose financial strain on low-income families, making schooling inaccessible, especially for girls (Tilak, 1996). Among children from low-income households, the rate of never enrolling is 3.6%, while the dropout rate is 8.7%. In contrast, children from wealthier families have a never-enrolled rate of 1.1% and a dropout rate of just 2.8% (Table 1).

Prior studies across India confirm that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to drop out before completing primary and secondary education (Paul & Thapa, 2024; Kumar et al., 2023; Garg et al., 2023; Singh & Mukherjee, 2015). Financially secure families can afford education-related expenses, ensuring their children's uninterrupted schooling. Conversely, children of poor families often engage in child labour or bonded labour to support their families, leading to school dropout (Santhya, 2024). Moreover, poor parents are more likely to marry off their daughters early to alleviate the financial burden on the family, which curtails their educational and economic opportunities (Paul, 2019).

II ASPIRE'S ROLE IN ADDRESSING OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN

In Keonjhar district, Aspire plays a pivotal role in addressing the issue of out-of-school children through a multi-faceted approach. To identify out-of-school children, a household survey is conducted, covering every child aged 0–17, with the help of local staff and volunteers. Once identified, Aspire facilitates their school admission, ensures their retention, and supports learning up to the elementary level through multiple interventions.

Children who have never been enrolled and short-term dropouts are directly admitted to age-appropriate classes in the nearest government school. For orphans, long-term dropouts, and children lacking family support, Aspire operates residential and non-residential bridge course centres where they receive informal education before being mainstreamed into formal schools. To ensure retention and a smooth transition, Aspire conducts regular tracking and monitoring through home visits. Additionally, Aspire supports learning within schools through the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) and Learning Enrichment Program (LEP) and promotes education beyond the classroom through vocational training, STEM learning, computational thinking, activity-based learning, setting up of libraries, integrating local culture and knowledge in learning, and digital education via Community Education Resource Centres (CERC).

Aspire also works to strengthen the School Management Committees (SMCs) and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) by providing training on school governance and management, and provides support for teacher training under the Right to Education (RTE) framework. Furthermore, it provides capacity building through regular meetings and orientation sessions with adolescents and young girls, as well as engaging communities to support children's education, prevent early marriage, and empower them to challenge harmful social norms (Aspire, 2023).

II CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study highlights the persistent issue of out-of-school children, revealing deep-rooted socioeconomic disparities that hinder educational access in the Keonjhar district of Odisha. Data reveal a substantial number of out-of-school children in 11 blocks of Keonjhar, which is primarily underrepresented in other surveys. Structural factors, such as caste, religion, and gender norms, continue to pose significant barriers, while parental education and household wealth have a strong influence on school participation. Additionally, rural-urban and gender disparities underscore the need for targeted interventions that address the distinct challenges of different regions and groups. While Aspire has made commendable efforts to reduce dropouts and improve enrollment and retention, further measures are needed to ensure sustainable and equitable access to education. The following recommendations aim to strengthen Aspire's efforts and address existing gaps:

1. Increasing schools and strengthening educational infrastructure in rural and tribal areas

Many children in rural and tribal-populated blocks lack access to schools due to a limited number of schools, leading to higher non-enrolment and dropout rates. In these areas, the enforcement of the RTE Act should be implemented to ensure that all children have access to quality education. Moreover, schools are often under-equipped, with a shortage of teachers and inadequate physical infrastructure. Increasing the number of schools and expanding school infrastructure, particularly in remote blocks like Banspal, Telkoi, and Ghatgaon, is crucial. Schools must be equipped with adequate facilities, including separate and functional toilets for girls, access to safe drinking water, ramps for students with disabilities, libraries, and playgrounds. Additionally, provisions for residential schools and hostels for tribal children should be increased to reduce the long travel distances that often discourage school attendance.

2. Addressing socio-cultural barriers and gender disparities

Gender norms, domestic responsibilities, and early marriages continue to hinder girls' education. Although Aspire is continuously working to break socio-cultural barriers, more efforts are needed through community-based interventions to challenge restrictive social norms. Awareness campaigns should emphasise the long-term benefits of educating girls and provide incentives to families that support their daughters' education. Additionally, promoting female role models and mentorship programs in schools can inspire young girls to pursue education.

3. Expanding economic support for poor families

Financial constraints are a significant barrier to school enrollment and retention. While elementary education is free, hidden costs such as transportation, uniforms, books, and stationery may disproportionately affect children from poor households. In addition, poor families may be forced to push their children into child labour activities to support their families rather than overeducating their children. Expanding direct financial assistance programs, such as scholarships and conditional cash transfers for economically disadvantaged families, can alleviate this burden. Providing mid-day meals beyond elementary levels and introducing meal incentives for secondary school students can further encourage retention.

4. Expanding alternative learning pathways and vocational training

While Aspire operates bridge courses for out-of-school children, additional flexible learning pathways are needed to accommodate the diverse learning needs of these students. Schools should introduce flexible learning models, such as evening schools and part-time education programs, to accommodate the diverse needs of students. Promoting enrollment in the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and Odisha State Open Schooling programs can help provide education for working children. There is a need to establish informal learning centres in remote areas, where children can receive part-time education without disrupting their livelihood activities. Additionally, integrating vocational training into the school curriculum can make education more appealing and relevant for students who are likely to enter the workforce at an early age. Skill-based training in handicrafts, embroidery and technology can enhance employment prospects while ensuring continued education.

5. Strengthening public-private partnerships for educational development

Expanding collaboration between government agencies, private organisations, and NGOs can mobilise resources and expertise for quality education. Encouraging industries operating in Keonjhar is necessary to invest in school infrastructure, scholarships, and digital learning through CSR initiatives. Scaling up successful models, such as Aspire, is crucial by integrating them into government educational programs. Furthermore, partnering with vocational training institutes and industries is important to align school-based skill training with market demands.

Note:

1. Aspire (A Society for Promotion of Inclusive and Relevant Education), a Delhi-based non-profit organisation, is working towards making education inclusive, socially relevant, and keeping pace with the 21st-century challenges. This organisation aims to ensure all children have the best possible learning opportunities and complete secondary schooling through a revitalised government school system.

Acknowledgement: The author is grateful to the Aspire team for the support throughout this study.

REFERENCES

- Aspire (2023). ASPIRE Annual Report 2022-23, New Delhi. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/18J4wi0fN7dglF6xvZG7hbYhUqvnzovn2/view>
- Choudhury, A. (2006). Revisiting dropouts: Old issues, fresh perspectives. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5257-5263.
- Drèze, J., & Kingdon, G. G. (2001). School participation in rural India. *Review of Development Economics*, 5(1), 1-24.
- Garg, M. K., Chowdhury, P., & Sheikh, I. (2023). Determinants of school dropouts in India: a study through survival analysis approach. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 1-23.
- Kugler, A. D., & Kumar, S. (2017). Preference for boys, family size, and educational attainment in India. *Demography*, 54(3), 835-859.
- Kumar, P., Patel, S. K., Debbarma, S., & Saggurti, N. (2023). Determinants of School dropouts among adolescents: Evidence from a longitudinal study in India. *PLoS One*, 18(3), e0282468.
- Pattanaik, J. K. (2020). Tribal Children in Odisha and their right to Education in the Home Language. *South Asia Research*, 40(2), 163-180.
- Paul, P. (2019). Effects of education and poverty on the prevalence of girl child marriage in India: A district-level analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 100, 16-21.
- Paul, P., & Thapa, S. (2024). Non-completion of primary and secondary levels of schooling among India's youth: evidence from a national survey. *SN Social Sciences*, 4(11), 208.
- Prakash, R., Beattie, T., Javalkar, P., Bhattacharjee, P., Ramanaik, S., Thalinja, R., ... & Isac, S. (2017). Correlates of school dropout and absenteeism among adolescent girls from marginalized community in north Karnataka, south India. *Journal of Adolescence*, 61, 64-76.
- PROBE. (1999). Public Report on Basic Education in India. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Santhya, K.G. (2024). Child labour and schooling in India. UNICEF and Population Council, New Delhi.
- Singh, R., & Mukherjee, P. (2015). Determinants of successful completion of secondary education: Evidence from Young Lives, Andhra Pradesh. Oxford Publications.
- Tilak, J. B. (1996). How free is 'free' primary education in India?. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 355-366.

Figure 1: Percentage of school dropouts and never enrolled by blocks, Keonjhar

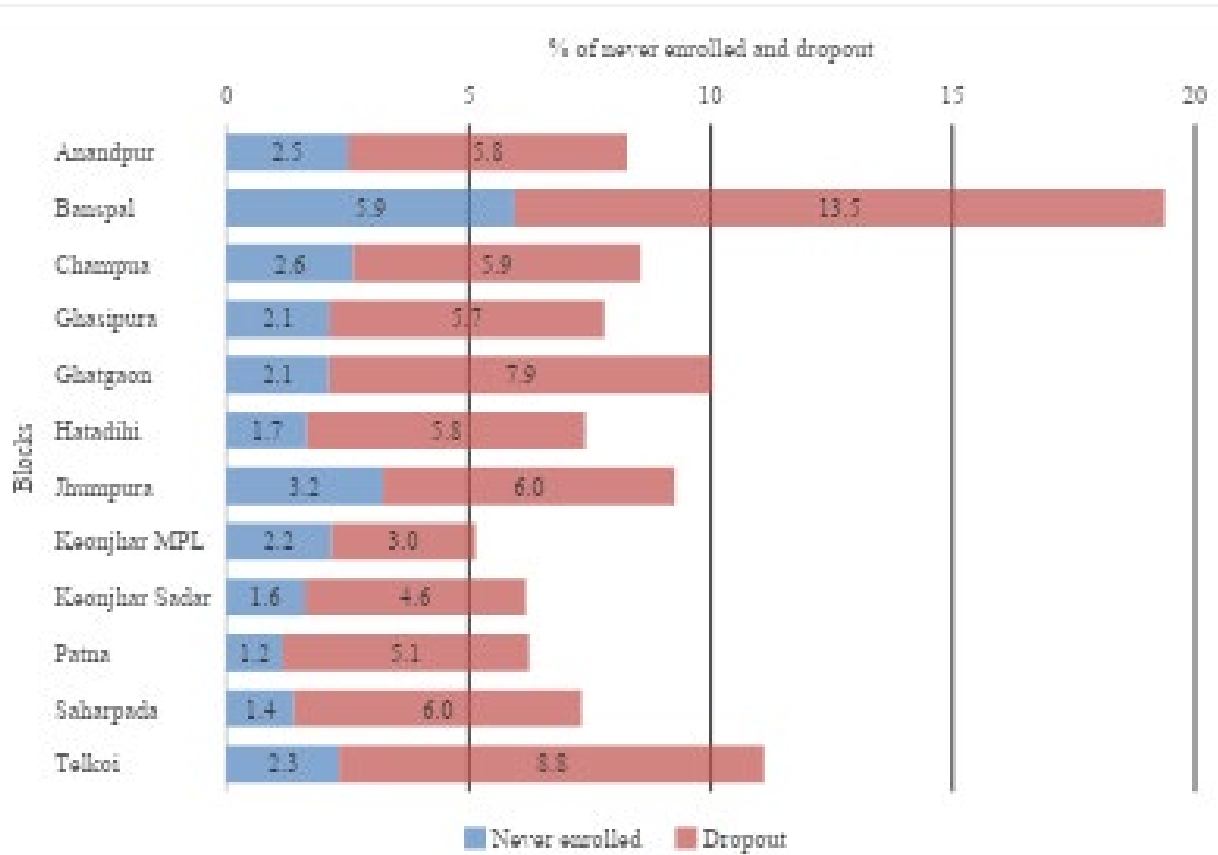


Figure 2: Percentage of never enrolled and dropouts by residence and gender

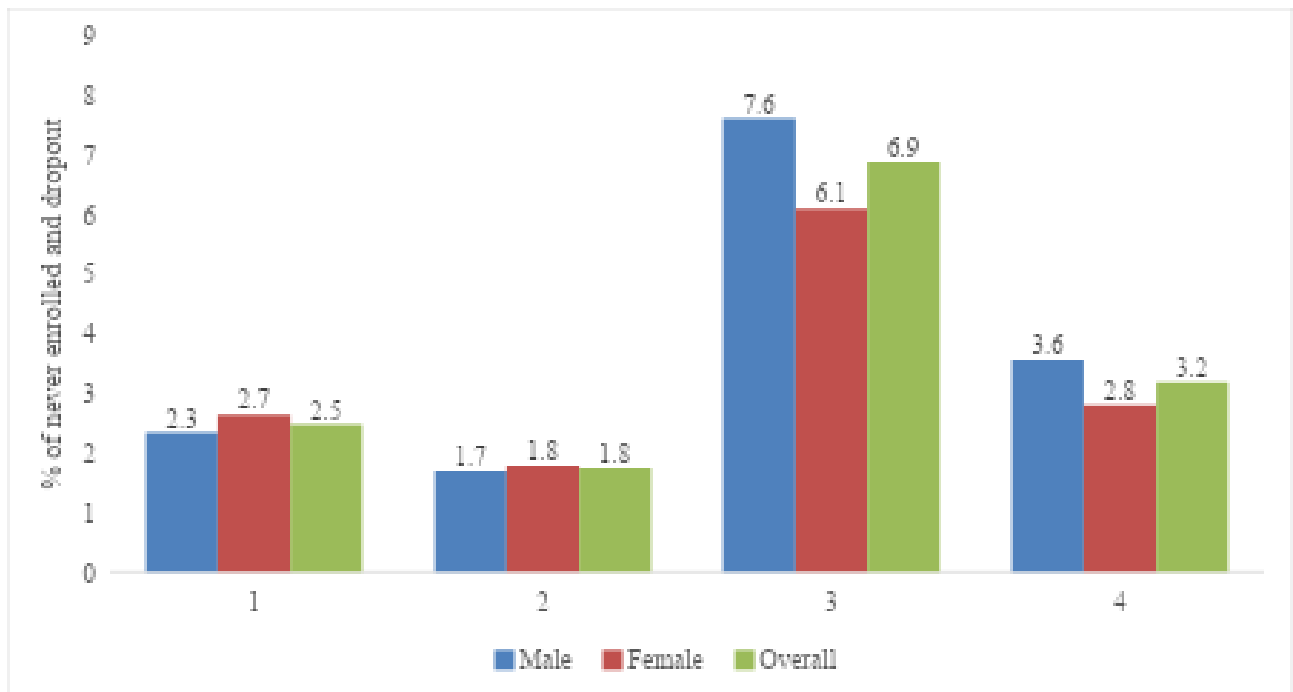


Table 1: Percentage of never enrolled and dropouts by socioeconomic characteristics, Keonjhar, Odisha

Variables	Never enrolled	Dropout	P-value
Gender			<0.001
Male	2.3	7.4	
Female	2.6	6	
Residence			<0.001
Rural	2.5	6.9	
Urban	1.8	3.2	
Caste			<0.001
SC	1.4	5	
ST	3.6	9.4	
OBC	1	3.3	
General	1.2	2.3	
Religion			<0.001
Hindu	2.4	6.7	
Muslim	2.8	4.7	
Christian	5.9	13.7	
Sarna	2.4	6.7	
Others	4.8	9	
Father's education			<0.001
No Schooling	4.8	12.8	
Primary	2.1	7.4	
Secondary	1.4	3	
Higher secondary and above	0.8	1.1	
Mother education			<0.001
No Schooling	4.3	12.1	
Primary	1.6	6	
Secondary	1.1	2	
Higher secondary and above	0.7	0.7	
Wealth tercile			<0.001
Poor	3.6	8.7	
Middle	2	6.5	
Rich	1.1	2.8	



WWW.SPRF.IN

If you have any suggestions, or would like to contribute, please write to us at contact@sprf.in

© Social Policy Research Foundation™