

# Beyond the Horizon: Understanding Rural Secondary School Dropout through Case Studies

Shaweta Miglani<sup>1</sup>, Raminder Singh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Education and Community Service, Punjabi University, Patiala-147002, India

## Abstract

Despite numerous initiatives targeted to improve education outcomes, secondary school dropout rates in rural India remain a tenacious challenge. This paper sheds light on the underlying causes of dropout rates in rural areas through a qualitative case study approach. Drawing on in-depth interviews with rural students and their parents, this study examines the interplay of poverty, gender disparities, lack of access to quality education, and social expectations that contribute to students' decisions to leave school. The findings disclose the nuanced and complex ways various dynamics intersect and influence a student's educational trajectory. By exploring the personal, familial, and community factors that shape educational experiences, this study intends to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dropout phenomenon in rural India. The findings have implications for policymakers, educators, and community leaders seeking operative strategies to address this prominent issue.

**Keywords:** Dropout, Secondary school education, Rural areas

## 1. Introduction

"India lives in its villages," a timeless adage, remains relevant today just as it was at the time of independence. Despite its remarkable industrial growth, India's essence, structure, and spirit are fundamentally rural. The majority of Indians reside in rural areas, with approximately 649,481 villages across the country (Census 2011). According to the Tendulkar Committee, 41.8% of the rural population lives below the poverty line. As of 2010, more than 22% of the entire rural populace faces significant physical and financial challenges. Agriculture and its allied activities in rural India contribute to 33% of the GDP and provide employment for 60% of the workforce.

Poverty is especially severe among members of scheduled castes and tribes in rural areas. One of the primary causes of rural poverty is the lack of access to productive assets and financial resources. Furthermore, poor educational foundations and a shortage of vocational skills exacerbate the problem, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Addressing these issues is crucial for fostering sustainable development and improving the quality of life for rural inhabitants.

In India, secondary school education is primarily managed by state governments. Here, the education system typically follows an 8+2+2+3 structure: eight years of elementary education (grades 1st to 8th), two years of secondary education (grades 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>), two years of senior secondary education (grades 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>), and three years of university education leading to a bachelor's degree. Each state used to independently determine the composition of elementary and secondary education. However, the recently introduced New Education Policy (2020) is steadily replacing these existing systems. The new structure, 5+3+3+4, corresponds to the age groups 3-8, 8-11, 11-14, and 14-18 years, respectively. While this

5+3+3+4 system reorganizes the stages of education, it does not alter the overall duration of formal education, which remains 10+2 years before higher education.

Despite ongoing deliberations and efforts, the allocation of budgetary resources to the education sector in the country remains skewed, mainly when examining the distribution between elementary and secondary education. Historically, elementary education has received a significantly larger portion of the budget. For instance, in the 2008-09 Budget Estimates (BE), elementary education was allocated 52.13% of the total education budget, while secondary education got only 29.34%. Over a decade later, this trend of disproportionate allocation continues. Recent data from the 2022-23 financial year specify that the imbalance has not been effectively addressed. Elementary education still commands a substantial share of the education budget, while secondary education continues to obtain a meager allocation. In FY 2022-23, around 65% of the allocated education budget was directed toward elementary education, with secondary education receiving merely 23%. This symbolizes only a marginal improvement from the 2008-09 figures, indicating that the growth in secondary education funding has not kept pace with the sector's needs.

Moreover, while initiatives like the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA) were introduced to bolster secondary education, the impact of these programs has been limited by insufficient funding. The continued disparity is evident in the planned expenditure as well; in FY 2022-23, secondary education received about 18% of the planned education expenditure, a modest increase from the 16% in 2008-09, but still not enough to meet the rising demands of this crucial stage in education.

The World Bank's 2009 report highlighted a significant discrepancy in secondary school enrollment rates among students from different economic backgrounds. Specifically, there was a remarkable 40 percentage point difference between the highest and lowest expenditure quintile groups, with enrollment rates sitting at 70% for students from the highest quintile. In contrast, only 30% of those from the lowest quintile were enrolled. Additionally, the report revealed a 20 percentage point gap in enrollment rates between urban and rural students, further underscoring the inequalities in access to education. These findings indicate a pressing need for targeted interventions to bridge the educational divide and enhance opportunities for all students, regardless of their socio-economic status or geographic location. As of the 2021-22 survey, the secondary school enrollment rates gap between urban and rural has narrowed but remains concerning. The urban enrollment rate for secondary school education is approximately 80%, while the rural rate is around 60%. Moreover, while overall enrollment rates have enhanced, the quality of secondary school education and retention rates in rural areas remain pitiable. Socio-economic factors further intensify enrollment differences, with students from lower-income families in rural areas facing additional challenges in accessing secondary education.

### **The Problem**

India's rural secondary school dropout rates exemplify a critical challenge for the nation's educational development. Regardless of various initiatives to enhance enrollment and retention, many students leave school before completing their secondary education, causing high dropout rates. Ward (2007), while reviewing India's education system, put forward that the most pressing challenge in the country is to increase access to secondary education in rural areas, mainly for girls, SC, ST, and minorities. Rural poverty, one of India's greatest evils, needs a robust secondary education system to stop the inbreeding of rural poverty and develop the rural economy by giving every citizen the right to live with dignity. Studying case studies of secondary school dropouts in rural India is crucial; it provides a nuanced understanding of the underlying causes, going beyond surface-level statistics to explore the individual,

familial, and community factors influencing a student's decision to leave school.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Previous research alleged poverty as a crucial cause of school dropouts in rural areas, with villagers prioritizing immediate income over education. In their studies, Tilak (2013) and Drèze & Kingdon (2001) illustrated how economic hardships compel students, especially boys, to enter the labor force prematurely, resulting in high dropout. Gender disparities further contribute to the problem, with girls facing the brunt due to societal expectations and early marriage. In rural India, educational decisions appeared to be highly dependent on the quality of local schools. So, the poor quality of local schools emerged as a crucial, significant, and negative influence on school attendance and dropout (Dreze & Kingdon, 2001; Motiram & Osberg, 2007; Nayar, 2015). Better access to secondary education increases primary school enrolment (Mukhopadhyay & Sahoo, 2012). However, the cost of secondary school education was found to be a more determinant factor than the distance of secondary school in rural areas, indicating that an unaffordable school nearby would be highly immaterial for the poor (Sidhu, 2010; Banerjee et al., 2013). The problem of transition to secondary school and retention was found to be more heightened in rural areas of India (Sidhu, 2010; Moorthy, 2013).

Research by Nayar (2011) and Raju & Bhat (2006) highlights how cultural norms often prioritize domestic responsibilities and early marriage over education for girls, leading to higher dropout rates among them. Derisory educational infrastructure in rural areas exacerbates dropout rates. Kingdon & Theopold (2008) and Muralidharan & Prakash (2017) emphasize that poor facilities, insufficient teaching staff, and long distances to schools discourage regular attendance, contributing to higher dropout rates. A study conducted by Samson, De, and Noronha (2005) focused on adolescents living in resettlement and squatter colonies in Delhi and found that only one-sixth of the students completed their education up to class 10. Similarly, a study covering two rural blocks in Hardoi district (Uttar Pradesh) and Sambalpur district (Odisha) revealed that nearly one-third of students drop out of school between upper primary and secondary levels, as reported by ASER (2016). These disparities are notably more pronounced in rural areas compared to urban settings, and they are especially pronounced among disadvantaged groups when compared to students from wealthier households.

## **2. Methodology**

In order to go to the roots of the problem of dropping-out from secondary school education, a research strategy called case study has been employed by the investigator for the empirical inquiry of the dropouts who had dropped out from secondary school. According to Best and Kahn (2010), 'the case study is a way of organizing social data for the purpose of viewing social reality which examines social unit as a whole. The unit may be a person, family, social group, social institution or community. The purpose is to understand the life cycle or an important part of the unit's life cycle. The case study probes deeply and analyzes the interaction between the factors that explain present status or the influence, change, or growth.'

The case studies were done for exploratory purposes with an illustrative approach. So, the typology of the case studies has been exploratory, illustrative, and multiple. Consequently, these case studies helped canvass a wholesome picture of the drop-out rate of secondary school students in rural Bathinda.

A sample of 20 (10 male+10 female) dropout students from of Bathinda District of Punjab who have dropped out from the rural secondary schools has been selected. The cases have been selected purposively.

In order to conduct the case studies of 20 dropouts of the secondary school, an observation schedule (Appendix 1) has been constructed and standardized by the investigator. The Observation schedule had been prepared to seek information about the subject under study beneath the following sections:

- A. General Information
- B. Educational Information
- C. Family Information
- D. Specific Information

The items in the observation schedule have been of mixed type and designed to get in-depth information from the subject and his/her family. Preliminary try-out of the observation schedule was carried out on two subjects who were secondary school dropouts to get feedback regarding the suitability of items of various components, language, and content of the observation schedule.

**Table 1: Showing the particulars of the 20 subjects selected for the case studies**

Sr.No.	Subject's Identity	Gender	Village	Class completed	Class from which dropped out
1.	Subject-I	Boy	Burj Gill	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Failure)
2.	Subject-II	Boy	Harnam Singh Wala	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup> (Not enrolled)
3.	Subject-III	Girl	Kutiwal Kalan	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Failure)
4.	Subject-IV	Boy	Burj Gill	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Failure)
5.	Subject-V	Girl	Kutiwal Kalan	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup> (Mid-session)
6.	Subject-VI	Girl	Chauke	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup> (Failure)
8.	Subject-VII	Girl	Burj Gill	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Not enrolled)
8.	Subject-VIII	Boy	Malkana	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup> (Mid-session)
9.	Subject-IX	Girl	Mehna	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Mid-session)
10.	Subject-X	Girl	Chak Ruldu Singh Wala	10 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup> (Not enrolled)
11.	Subject-XI	Boy	Deon	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup> (Not enrolled)
12.	Subject-XII	Boy	Gulabgarh	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Failure)
13.	Subject-XIII	Girl	Lehri	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Not enrolled)
14.	Subject-XIV	Girl	Lehra Sondha	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Not enrolled)
15.	Subject-XV	Boy	Bhucho Kalan	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Failure)
16.	Subject-XVI	Girl	Kot Bhara	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup> (Failure)
18.	Subject-XVII	Boy	Gulabgarh	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup> (Two Con-

					secutive fail-ures)
18.	Subject-XVIII	Girl	Gulabgarh	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Not enrolled)
19.	Subject-XIX	Boy	Laleana	10 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup> (Not enrolled)
20.	Subject-XX	Boy	Lelewala	8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup> (Mid-session)

### 3. Analysis and Conclusions

Dropping out of school is not merely a result of academic failure; it often stems from a combination of family, social, school-related, and academic challenges. Interviews with 20 dropouts from secondary schools in the rural areas of Bathinda district revealed that a single factor rarely causes dropout decisions. Instead, multiple intertwined reasons frequently act together to shove students out of school. The most conspicuous of these is poverty or poor economic conditions.

The findings exhibited that financial constraints often place heavy responsibilities on adolescents. Boys are frequently pushed into illegal child labor, while girls are compelled to take on domestic responsibilities, both of which lead to school dropouts. Numerous studies support the idea that poverty primarily contributes to students leaving school (Cardoso & Verner, 2007; Dachi & Garrett, 2003; Brown & Park, 2002; Colclough et al., 2000). Many of the girls interviewed left school to care for younger siblings or fare household chores, especially when their mothers were employed or the family faced a crisis. Other studies have confirmed that the need to take on household responsibilities significantly increases girls' dropout rate (Chugh, 2011; Patel & Gandhi, 2016). Gouda & Sekher (2014) also found that the cost of schooling and the need to earn money or manage household work were key factors driving school dropouts. Similarly, Baruah & Goswami (2012) identified domestic work as a significant reason for students leaving school.

Another grave issue identified in this study was parental unawareness and lack of education in rural areas. This often leads to problems such as large family sizes and early marriages for girls. Chirteş (2010) found that parents with low levels of education are less motivated to send their children to school, which is consistent with our findings.

The analysis showed that family size is also a significant cause of school dropouts, with children from larger families tending to leave school earlier than those from smaller households. Eloundou (2000) similarly concluded that larger families face greater financial burdens, making it less likely for children to attend school regularly. Chugh (2011) supported this by showing that children with many siblings are 36% more likely to drop out than those from smaller families.

Additionally, none of the dropouts studied had parents who had completed secondary education. Various studies have established that higher parental education levels are associated with increased access to education, higher attendance rates, and lower dropout rates (Ainsworth et al., 2005; Ersado, 2005; Glick & Sahn, 2000).

Children from fatherless households or those who are orphaned were found to be at a higher risk of dropping out. Case & Ardington (2004), Evan & Miguel (2004), Hunter & May (2003), and Bicego et al. (2003) all agreed that the death of a parent increases a child's vulnerability to dropping out. As a result, extending social security benefits to all workers and laborers is crucial so that a child's education does



not suffer in the event of the death or illness of the family's primary breadwinner.

To top these family constraints, another major factor that emerged was students' failure at the entrance of secondary levels of school education, i.e., either in the ninth standard or, at the maximum, in the tenth board examination. This was mainly due to students' weak foundations in elementary schools, which showcased the failure of the 'No Detention Policy.' The board examination failure was due to incompetent teaching-learning, lack of teachers, and teachers' overburdened state due to non-teaching tasks. Poor learning levels were quite apparent among school beginners, e.g., third-grade students, and 58% of them were unable to read textbooks from grade one (ASER, 2017). Synchronizing learning with the curriculum from the start of primary education is vital as only one in ten children lacking basic reading, writing, or numeracy skills can accomplish them after a supplementary year of schooling (Bhattacharjea, Banerji & Wadhwa, 2011; Pritchett & Beatty, 2015).

It was observed that most of the students were not fully aware of the functioning and provisions of the Punjab Open School and National Open School; these boards have the same curriculum, examination, and certification process as in formal schools. In contrast, those who were aware were not able to appear in open school due to its fees. Punjab Open School has hardly been able to cover even one percent of the out-of-school children at the matriculation level. The open school in Punjab is reliant only on student fees. Gautam (2016), in his study, agreed to the same that the open school in Punjab is dependent only on student fees and has not realized its full potential.

It was also witnessed that most students who dropped out of school worked in the unorganized sector to earn money. Chugh (2011) also emphasized that there is no need for education for employment in the unorganized sector, which is a significant cause of dropout from secondary schools.

Moreover, students drop out not just because of low academic scores or failures in examinations, but there have been socio-economic reasons to drag them towards dropping out. Besides, cultural perceptions, especially for girls, were also critical as girls' safety still has been a significant issue, and cases of eve-teasing hold families from sending girls to school, especially when there was non-availability of school in the village. Therefore, the non-availability of secondary schools in the villages further accentuates the girls' dropout. As the distance between the school and household increases in villages, the prospect of children attending the school decreases (Colclough et al., 2000; PROBE, 1999). Colclough et al. (2000) proved that the deficit in female enrollment is a consequence of cultural practice rather than poverty; moreover, the gender inequalities in schooling will not necessarily lessen with increased income.

Increased parents' awareness about the importance of secondary education and its educational returns would be the first factor that positively lessens the dropout. The parents should be aware that secondary school education benefits not only to procure jobs but also empowers the children as better farmers, better business people, and, predominantly, negotiate the world with strength. Several studies supported that school-related involvement and parents' awareness are closely associated with adolescents' high scores and an overall sense of higher educational accomplishment (Chen & Gregory, 2009; Gordon & Cui, 2012; Hill & Tyson, 2009).

Parents and children alike aspire to quality education, where students actively learn and gain knowledge in a well-equipped school with good infrastructure, supportive teachers, and regular instruction in a safe, secure environment. Unfortunately, the current system often falls short, particularly in rural areas, where schools are far away, suffer from poor infrastructure, and face a shortage of teachers who may not fully engage in teaching.

There are several deep-rooted systemic issues in rural government schools, including teacher absenteeism (Kingdon & Muzammil, 2009), gender disparity (Bose, 2012), and inadequate infrastructure (Kumar et al., 2011). However, one of the most powerful insights from this study is that a well-maintained school, a proactive headmaster, and an engaged school community can help children overcome many of these barriers. The researcher encountered cases of children from extremely poor and disadvantaged families who stayed in school because teachers and principals made extra efforts to prevent dropouts.

To foster such outcomes, it is essential to stop blaming teachers constantly, reduce their non-academic workload, and provide proper incentives to motivate them. Accountability systems that tie teacher incentives to student progress and achievement should be established most importantly.

It is also vital to re-evaluate the implementation of the 'No Detention Policy' to ensure that it is not misinterpreted as a license for no teaching or assessment. Poorly executed policies have long been a problem in the education sector (Grant, 2012; Tandon & Mohanty, 2003). Researchers have identified issues with such programs, where the focus often shifts from quality to quantity, turning the problem from a lack of access to education into one of low-quality education (Chimombo, 2005; Wedgwood, 2007).

### Recommendations

- **Enhancing Parental Awareness:** Educating parents about the significance of secondary education and its long-term benefits can significantly reduce dropout rates. By emphasizing the importance of education in securing better employment, entrepreneurship, and personal growth, parents can become more supportive of their children's education, decreasing dropout rates.
- **Upgrading Credit Cum-Subsidy Schemes:** The government should strengthen and diversify financial support programs for landless poor laborers, focusing on providing accessible loans and subsidies to those in need. This will help alleviate poverty and reduce the reliance on child labor.
- **Implementing Effective Child Labor Monitoring:** The government must establish a robust system to monitor and enforce child labor laws, ensuring that underage children are not exploited in the unorganized sector. Severe penalties and punishments should be enforced on violators to abolish child labor.
- **Prohibiting Early Girl Child Marriage:** It is critical to implement severe actions to curb early girl-child marriage practices in rural areas. Awareness programs and enforcement of laws should be prioritized to protect young girls' rights and futures.
- **Enhancing Punjab Open School's and National Open School's Reach:** Open Schools need to reach more out-of-school children and provide them with quality education. Therefore, the government should fund the open schools' study materials and publicity costs.
- **Encompassing Social Security Benefits:** The Social Security Act should be extended to all workers and laborers to ensure that children's education is not compromised/halted in case of a family earner's death or sickness.
- **Re-evaluating the 'No Detention Policy':** The Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) needs to review the implementation of the 'No Detention Policy' to ensure that it does not compromise teaching standards and assessment. Regular inspections of elementary schools are necessary to maintain quality education.

- **Introducing Remedial Programs for Repeaters:** Schools should establish remedial programs for students who repeat classes, with trained teachers providing support. These programs should be funded within the school's resources without additional fees for parents.
- **Launching Students' Welfare Services:** Schools should establish a student welfare service to monitor students' domestic circumstances and provide pastoral support, helping reduce dropout rates.
- **Teacher Training and Motivation:** The State Institutes for teacher training should prioritize teacher motivation and sensitization on the issue of dropout, providing training on technical skills and capabilities such as counseling, communication, and negotiation.

Therefore, to reduce dropout rates, comprehensive approaches are required to help at-risk students by addressing the social and academic problems they face and improving the at-risk settings that contribute to these problems.

#### 4. Appendix

Appendix 1 is the observation schedule prepared and used by the investigator for collecting information for the case studies.

#### 5. Conflict of Interest

Authors do not have any conflict of interest to declare.

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