

The Role of Parental Awareness in Realizing the Right to Education: Insights from Odisha

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Abstract: The 86th Constitutional Amendment of 2002 and the subsequent Right of Children to free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009, guarantee quality education for children aged 6–14 years as a fundamental right in India. Within this framework, Section 12(1)(c) mandates that private unaided schools reserve one-fourth of their entry-level seats for children belonging to economically weaker sections (EWS) and disadvantaged groups (DG), thereby striving to democratize access and strengthen social inclusion. Yet, the successful realization of the Act rests not only on government commitment but equally on parental awareness, since parents serve as the principal claimants of these entitlements. This study examines the level of parental understanding of the RTE Act, with a specific focus on Section 12(1)(c), in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India. The objectives were to assess the extent of parental awareness, identify their sources of information, and explore the processes followed by them to secure admissions into private schools. The research encompassed four leading schools i.e. D.A.V. Public School Chandrasekharapur, ODM School, KIIT International School, and Loyola School which collectively have enrolled children from marginalized groups under the RTE mandate. Parents of these children formed the study sample. The findings highlight that parental knowledge is narrow and fragmented. Very few had comprehensive knowledge of the Act in terms of benefits, entitlements, or procedural details. Information was found to be transmitted largely through community leaders, with schools and mass media playing only a minimal role in awareness-building. In relation to the application process, a majority of parents still preferred traditional, paper-based methods pointing to a persistent digital divide in access and literacy. Overall, the study reveals that fragmented awareness restricts parents from fully exercising their children's educational rights. Unless awareness campaigns broaden their scope beyond eligibility-centered messaging, and schools as well as government bodies take a greater role in transparent dissemination, the transformative vision of Section 12(1)(c) will remain unrealized. Bridging knowledge gaps, strengthening digital inclusion, and engaging multiple stakeholders are essential to achieving the Act's promise of inclusive and equitable education.

Key words: Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, Section 12(1)(c), Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), Parental awareness, Inclusive education, Information dissemination, educational justice

Introduction

The 86th Amendment Act of 2002 made free and compulsory education a fundamental right for every child aged 6 to 14 years by adding Article 21A to the Indian Constitution. It mandated that the State is to ensure that elementary education is free and compulsory. This amendment laid the foundation for the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE) of 2009. The Right to Education (RTE) Act, enacted in 2009 as a fundamental right in India, guarantees free and compulsory education for children aged 6 to 14 years (Balraksha Bharat, 2025). The Act aims to bridge educational disparities by mandating access and quality education for marginalized groups. The very intents have again been reiterated by NEP, 2020. The RTE is a promising and ambitious act that aimed at bridging the barriers of quality education for the marginalized children. However, the success of such a progressive legislative framework is not only dependent on the proactiveness of the government, but largely depends on the awareness and active participation of parents as primary stakeholders in the education ecosystem. Parental knowledge about the RTE Act's provisions, including eligibility, facilities, and application procedures, critically influences their ability to advocate for their children's rights and facilitates the effective implementation of the Act's mandate (NCPCR, 2021; Saini & Ajmani, 2023). This paper explores the level of parental awareness of the RTE Act, factors shaping this awareness, sources of information, digital engagement, and associated implications for equitable education in the country. The focus of the study hovers around Section 12(1) (c) of RTE.

Section 12(1)(c) of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, is a critical legislative provision aiming at promoting educational equity and inclusion. It requires all private unaided schools to reserve 25% of their seats at the entry-level class for children belonging to economically weaker sections (EWS) and disadvantaged groups (DG). This reservation ensures that these children receive free and compulsory education up to Class VIII, thereby reducing educational inequalities and fostering social inclusion. The provision is designed not only to guarantee access but also to promote the right to quality education for marginalized children.

Review of literature

Existing literature on this thematic area suggest that the implementation responsibility lies primarily with state governments, which vary widely in the clarity of their rules, the efficiency of their admission processes, and the adequacy of reimbursements made to the private schools for educating these children (Education for All India, 2015). Additionally, challenges such as ambiguity in eligibility criteria, reimbursement mechanisms, and the exemption of minority-run schools complicate the full realization of the provision's intent (Dongre, 2017). Awareness among parents and transparent grievance redressal systems are pivotal to ensuring effective uptake and compliance, highlighting the need for coordinated efforts across government bodies, civil society organizations, and school managements.

Empirical research consistently reveals significant gaps in parental awareness about the RTE Act across Indian states. Sengupta (2024) noted that tribal parents in Dakshin Dinajpur had generally low awareness with no significant gender differences, stressing on the need for targeted awareness programmes for marginalized groups. Likewise, a Mumbai-based survey indicated limited parental understanding of Section 12(1)(c), which affects admissions and highlights gaps in information dissemination (SPRF, 2022). Educational attainment and residential locality also influence awareness. In this connection, Kumari et al. (2024) and Sengupta (2024), noted urban parents were more informed than rural ones due to greater media exposure. The significance of parental awareness goes beyond knowledge; it directly impacts enrollment rates under the Act. A NITI Aayog (2021) survey across multiple states emphasized that while awareness positively affects admissions under Section 12(1)(c), barriers persist due to unclear information on eligibility and benefits. This corroborates NCPCR's (2022) findings on implementation challenges caused by insufficient parental understanding, pointing to the need for improved information outreach. A recent study by Penthoi and Kar (2024) in Odisha's Puri District surveyed 100 parents of sixth-grade students and found that male, urban, and more-educated parents exhibited markedly higher awareness levels (mean scores: males 25.0, females 23.0; urban 27.0, rural 23.0; matric and above 23.6, below matric 19.5), demonstrating that socio-demographic factors strongly influence RTE-related knowledge. A national-level study echoed these patterns with 59% of parents showing very limited awareness (Zenodo, 2024). Other states including Uttar Pradesh and Kerala also reveal that educated and economically better-off parents possess greater knowledge, emphasizing the intersectionality of education, income, and awareness (Saini & Ajmani, 2023). These findings highlight a recurring theme: despite extensive awareness programmes by governmental and non-governmental organizations, parental understanding remains fragmentary, constrained by sociocultural and infrastructural barriers (Kumari, 2023).

Research Gap

The aforesaid literature navigation brings the following research gaps which have subsequently become the focus of this research.

- Comprehensive, state-wide evidence on RTE 12(1)(c) remains missing in Odisha, with only fragmented studies like Penthoi and Kar (2024) offering limited insights.
- The exclusion of elite and international schools from the ambit of research leaves a critical void in understanding equity and access under the Act.
- Odisha lacks intersectional analyses that capture how tribal, rural, caste, and economic vulnerabilities intersect with institutional resistance, leaving systemic barriers underexplored.

These three prominent research gaps have become the main thrust of this research reflected in this article.

Study Locale and Sample Selection

The study has been situated in the capital city of Bhubaneswar. It has brought four schools into its sample coverage. They are the D.A.V. Public School, Chandrasekharpur, ODM school, KiiT International School and the Loyola School which accommodate around 471 students from marginalized background under the provisions of Section 12 (1) © of the RTE Act. The parents of these children were brought into the sample purview.

Research Relevance

Thus, it is an established fact that when parents possess adequate knowledge and awareness of their legal entitlements, they are more likely to assertively seek their children's right to free and compulsory education, thereby narrowing the divide between legislative intent and its practical realization. In contrast, limited awareness often results in underuse or neglect of these provisions, perpetuating the exclusion of vulnerable children from quality education. Hence, the researcher recognized that assessing parental knowledge is crucial for evaluating both the effectiveness and the overall impact of the RTE Act.

Objectives of the Study

The study was launched to understand certain nuances of parental awareness on RTE in general and parents' level of knowledge on RTE Section 12(1) © in particular. In this context, the following objectives were framed to bring a conclusive insight on the primary objective.

- To assess awareness of parents on the RTE Act.
- To identify the sources that generate knowledge on RTE among parents
- To examine the mode of application process resorted to by parents from marginalized communities to enroll their children in private schools.

Study Outcomes

- In assessing parents' awareness on RTE Act, it has been noted by the researchers that parental awareness has been explicitly prioritized in the guidelines and standard operating procedures for implementing the RTE Act. This has also called for targeted campaigns and highlight the role of Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) in informing and assisting parents during the admission process (NCPCR, 2021). Recognizing that parental empowerment is central to the Act's success, the present study examined the level of awareness in Odisha's capital city and explored the variables influenced awareness-building. The findings are presented in Table No. 1 and Chart No. 1.

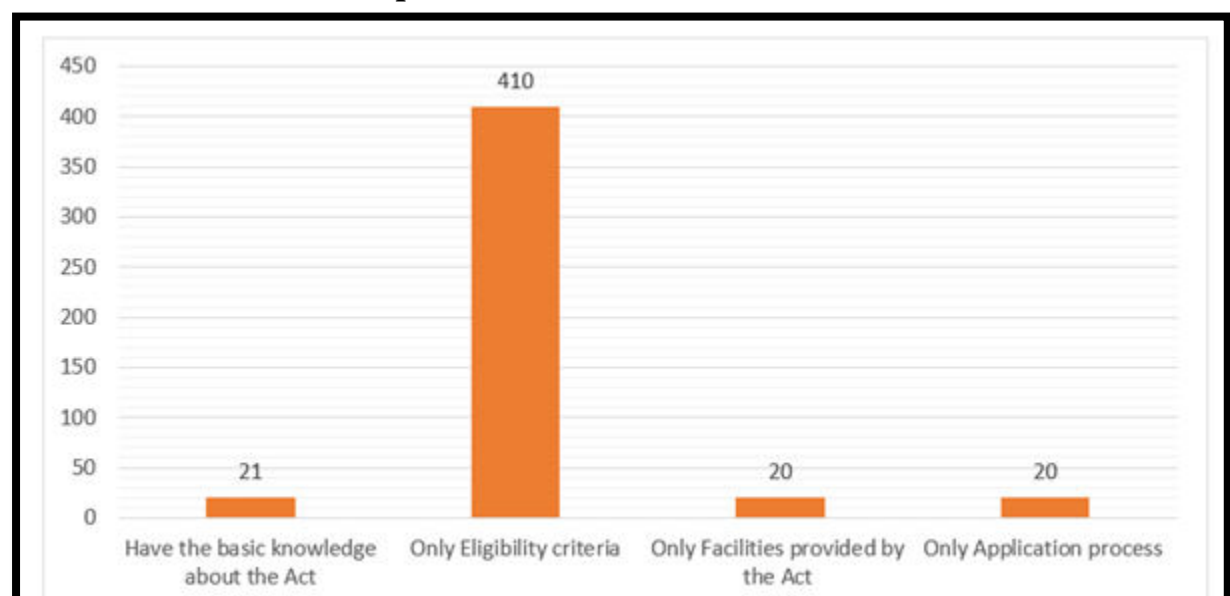
Table No-1. Awareness of the parents on RTE

Awareness of Parents on the RTE Act	No of Respondents
Have the basic knowledge about the Act	21 (4.46)
Only the Eligibility criteria	410 (87.04)
Only Facilities provided by the Act	20 (4.25)
Only the Application process	20 (4.25)
Total	471 (100.00)

(Figures in Parenthesis indicate Percentage)

Source: Primary Data

Chart-1. Awareness of the parents on RTE



Source: Primary Data

The data in Table No. 1 and Chart No. 1 clearly indicate that parental awareness of the Right to Education (RTE) Act in Odisha's capital city is both limited and uneven. Among 471 respondents, only 4.46% reported having basic, overall knowledge of the Act, while the overwhelming majority (87.04%) were aware solely of its eligibility criteria. Awareness about specific facets such as facilities provided (4.25%) and the application process (4.25%) remains extremely low.

The final insight that emerges is that awareness-building efforts have disproportionately emphasized eligibility while neglecting comprehensive dissemination of benefits and procedures. As a result, parents are inadequately

equipped with the knowledge on the act to exercise their full rights under the Act. Without holistic knowledge, their ability to access entitlements or hold schools accountable is severely constrained, undermining the RTE's goal of ensuring inclusive and equitable education.

These findings echo with Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, where limited access to knowledge reproduces social disadvantage, and with Freire's concept of critical pedagogy, which highlights the emancipatory role of comprehensive awareness. When parental understanding is fragmented, the Act's potential to empower marginalized households and democratize educational opportunity is substantially undermined.

- With regard to the sources that generate knowledge on RTE among parents, the researchers could clearly discover from the existing literature that in the realm of public policy, the dissemination of information depends on a network of agents who act as critical intermediaries between policymakers and the public. These include not only state institutions but also non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups, the media, and community actors (Halligan, 1995; Dobuzinskis, Howlett, & Laycock, 2007; Verschuere, 2009). The media, in particular, serves as a powerful amplifier by framing issues, enhancing visibility, and informing diverse audiences about policy provisions such as the Right to Education (RTE). Alongside this, grassroots actors like the community members and local leaders are to translate abstract policy into lived realities by fostering dialogue, promoting awareness, and encouraging collective action (Leeman et al., 2013; Purtle, 2020).

Recognizing this multi-stakeholder landscape, the present study sought to understand the actual sources from which parents became aware of RTE. Their responses were systematically categorized, and the findings are presented in Table No. 2 and visually represented in Chart No. 2.

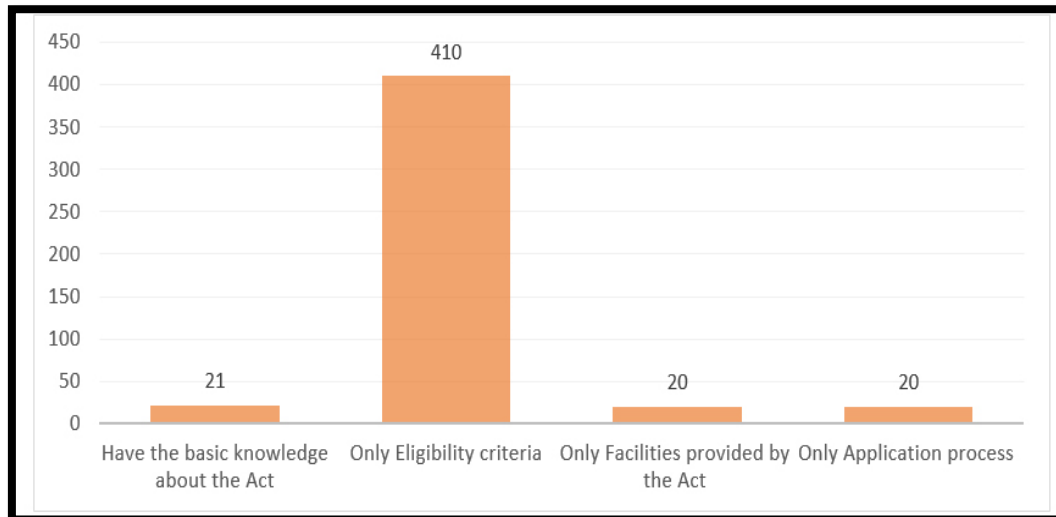
Table No-2. Sources of Knowledge on RTE

Sources of Information	No of Respondents
School Authorities	20 (4.25)
Community leaders	388 (82.38)
Friends and Relatives	42 (8.92)
Mass media	21 (4.45)
Total	471 (100.00)

(Figures in Parenthesis indicate Percentage)

Source: Primary Data

Chart-2. Sources of Information on RTE



Source: Primary Data

The data in2 reveal a communication paradox in the dissemination of knowledge about the Right to Education (RTE). An overwhelming majority (82.38%) rely on community leaders as their primary information source, stressing the dominance of localized authority and social trust building process in generating educational awareness. Friends and relatives (8.92%) serve as secondary channels, while the roles of school authorities (4.25%) and mass media (4.45%) remain strikingly marginal. This heavy dependence on informal networks suggests both strength and vulnerability: while community leaders ensure accessibility, the accuracy and consistency of information remain uncertain. The weak involvement of schools, despite their statutory role symbolizes their apathy towards the act and its provisions and the limited penetration of mass media highlight systemic shortcomings in formal outreach.

These findings closely align with established sociopolitical theories on opinion leadership and communication. Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model emphasises how opinion leaders, such as community leaders serve as critical intermediaries who filter, interpret, and disseminate information, thereby enhancing message credibility and acceptance within social networks. Similarly, Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory stresses the centrality of interpersonal communication and trusted local figures in promoting the adoption of new ideas, a process particularly salient in collectivist contexts, where relational trust shapes information uptake. The predominance of community leaders over schools and mass media also echoes Weber's (1922/1978) concept of traditional authority, where legitimacy is anchored in longstanding social hierarchies and communal trust rather than in bureaucratic or institutional mechanisms. The marginal role of media can be attributed to limited access and low engagement among disadvantaged parents, while friends and relatives, confined to the same social strata, lack the informational depth to act as significant channels of RTE awareness.

- In exploring the third objective i.e. to examine the mode of application process resorted to by parents from marginalized communities to enroll their children in private schools which constitutes a part of their awareness and knowledge, the researchers could get an assertion from the available literature that in the contemporary digital era, society has made remarkable progress in leveraging information technology to streamline the dissemination of government programmes and educational processes. Within the ambit of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, framed to ensure equitable access to quality schooling, this trend is increasingly evident, as private institutions have already digitalised their admission systems for applications and enrolment (Mukherjee & Maheshwari, 2021). Yet, even as governance adopts digital modes, the persistent digital divide poses a formidable barrier to the effective implementation of such initiatives. This divide is marked by inequalities in access to digital devices, reliable internet connectivity, and digital literacy skills. Children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected, finding themselves excluded or disadvantaged in navigating technology-based application procedures under RTE. Many parents remain either unaware of online mechanisms or heavily dependent on intermediaries to meet digital requirements. This reliance not only raises concerns about inclusivity but also undermines the equity mandate of the RTE Act (UNESCO, 2020). If unaddressed, such structural gaps weaken the promise of technology as an instrument of social justice and educational empowerment. Hence, bridging the digital divide becomes a precondition for ensuring that IT-driven solutions translate into substantive equity, rather than perpetuating exclusion (World Bank, 2022). Against this backdrop, the present study sought to document how parents, particularly from marginalised communities, undertook the process of applying to private schools for their children under the RTE framework. The responses collected through the field survey are presented in Table No. 3 and visually depicted in Chart No. 3.

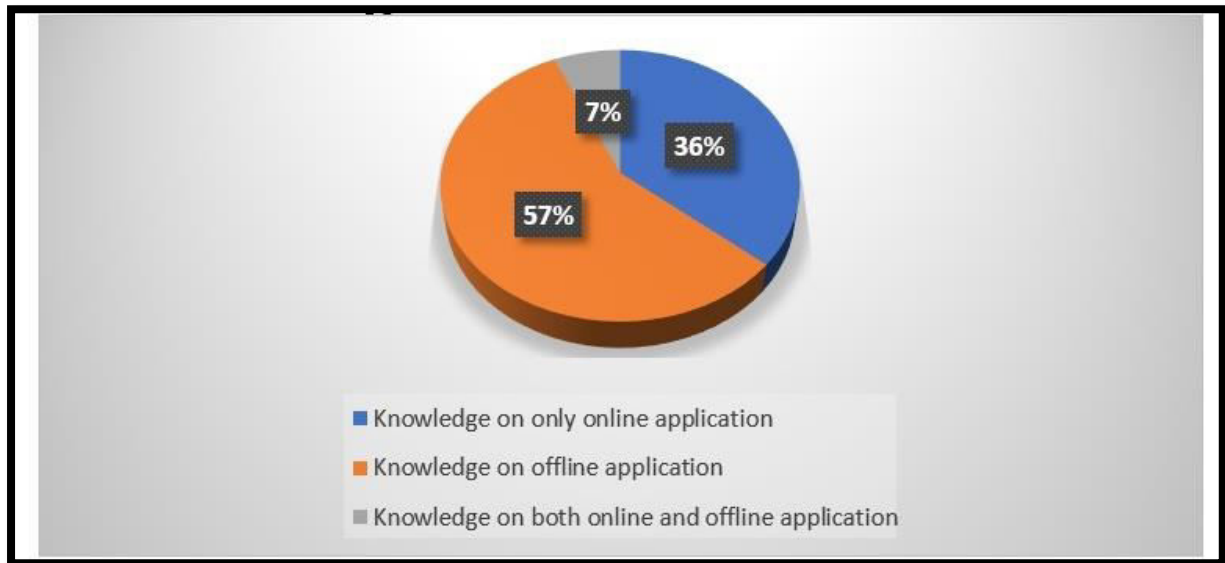
Table No-3. Mode of Application Process Resorted To

Mode of Application process resorted to	No of Respondents
Only online application	170 (36.10)
Only offline application	270 (57.32)
Both online and offline application	31 (6.58)
Total	471 100.00

(Figures in Parenthesis indicate Percentage)

Source: Primary Data

Chart No-3. Mode of Application Process Resorted To



Source: Primary Data

The analysis of the table and chart on the mode of application process shows that traditional methods remain more common, though digital options are gradually expanding. Out of 471 respondents, the majority i.e. 270 individuals (57.32%) relied only on offline applications, highlighting the continuing importance of face-to-face or paper-based procedures, often due to limited digital literacy, inadequate infrastructure, or greater trust in conventional methods. At the same time, 170 respondents (36.10%) used only online applications, reflecting a growing comfort with technology and appreciation of its convenience, speed, and flexibility. A smaller group of 31 respondents (6.58%) combined both approaches, indicating a transitional stage where users are testing digital processes but still depend on offline systems for confirmation and support. Overall, offline modes continue to dominate, but the growing preference for online applications and the hybrid usage suggest steady progress toward digital adoption, with traditional reliance persisting in parallel.

The application patterns thus clearly project a persistent digital divide among parents, shaped by unequal access to and comfort with technology. The predominance of offline applications indicates restricted digital access, while exclusive online use reflects growing digital literacy, and mixed use suggests a gradual transition toward digital practices. Although policies mandate inclusion, researchers argue that local partners must provide hands-on digital support to ensure equitable participation and knowledge building. From a sociological lens, Castells' Network Society (1996) explains how digital networks reshape social structures, with partial parental engagement highlighting uneven inclusion in the digital sphere. This resonates with van Dijk's (2020) view that structural inequalities fuel digital and knowledge divides, which in turn perpetuate social inequality and limit policy impact. Berg's Political Theory of Digitalization (2022) further emphasizes that technology operates within political and socioeconomic

contexts; reliance on offline applications often stems from weak infrastructure and absent literacy initiatives. Thus, parental application choices reflect deeper socio-political dynamics of digital inclusion, emphasizing the way technological inequalities continue to shape access to opportunities and knowledge.

Recommendations for Enhancing Parental Awareness and Engagement

To address these challenges, multi-dimensional, culturally-sensitive, and inclusive awareness campaigns are vital. These should include:

- To move beyond eligibility-centric messaging and share comprehensive information on all provisions of RTE 12(1)(c), including entitlements, facilities, and grievance redressal.
- To develop user-friendly learning materials in Odia and local dialects using visual aids, comics, and audio messages for low-literacy households.
- To mandate Parent-Teacher Associations to conduct regular RTE-orientation meetings in alignment with admission timelines.
- To train community leaders with accurate, up-to-date knowledge so they can act as credible information brokers and reduce misinformation.
- To make it obligatory for private schools to organize RTE awareness drives and admission-assistance camps before enrolment sessions, with penalties for non-compliance enforced by district monitoring bodies.
- To use regional television, FM radio, and social media campaigns with relatable local narratives and case stories to widen outreach.
- To establish RTE facilitation centres at ward and block levels with kiosks, tablets, and trained volunteers to assist parents with online applications.
- To conduct short digital literacy workshops during government or NGO community programs such as ration distribution, health camps, or SHG meetings.
- To keep both offline and online systems equally available to prevent exclusion of parents who lack internet access or digital skills.
- To institute regular audits requiring schools to report outreach efforts, guidance sessions, and the number of parents assisted in RTE applications.
- To build strong NGO-government collaborations for training, handholding, and grievance resolution.
- To create simple grievance channels—toll-free helplines and WhatsApp lines—for parents to report non-compliance by schools.
- To identify and engage parent champions from marginalized communities as peer educators to inspire and guide others.
- To involve women's groups and self-help groups as key multipliers of awareness, recognizing their central role in decision-making on children's education.
- To organize workshops in slums and tribal pockets using Paulo Freire's dialogic learning approach so parents can critically understand the law and use it to demand accountability.

Concluding Observations

Thus, this Odishan study divulges out with striking clarity that the Right to Education, while constitutionally guaranteed and legislatively anchored, is loomed around with risks. It remains a symbolic promise as parents themselves are not equipped with comprehensive, actionable knowledge of its provisions. When awareness is reduced largely to eligibility criteria, it transforms into a ceiling that limits possibilities, instead of serving as the gateway to empowerment and social mobility. This research reveals how such fragmented knowledge perpetuates the very exclusions the Act was designed to dismantle. Converting parental awareness into cultural capital, therefore, is not a supplementary concern but the fulcrum of educational justice. Bridging the divides of information, digital access, and institutional accountability is far more than an administrative necessity. It is a constitutional and moral obligation to ensure that no child is left behind. Only when marginalized parents in Odisha, and can transit from being passive recipients to active rights-bearers and claimants, Section 12(1)(c) will fulfill its transformative vision of democratizing education and redrawing the contours of social equity.

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