

Student Perception of Learning Economics at the Secondary Level of Rayagada District, Odisha: A Descriptive Study

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Abstract

*Student perception how learners experience a subject's relevance, difficulty, and classroom delivery is one of the stronger predictors of engagement and eventual achievement, yet almost no empirical evidence exists on how this construct operates among secondary students in India's tribal-majority districts. This study examined student perception of learning Economics across four dimensions interest and motivation, teaching methods and classroom environment, conceptual understanding and problem-solving, and attitude toward perceived difficulty and tested for a gender difference in overall perception. A descriptive cross-sectional survey was conducted with 150 secondary students (83 boys, 67 girls) from Classes IX–X across four government schools in Rayagada district, Odisha, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a self-developed, bilingual (Odia-English) 30-item Likert-scale instrument, the Students' Perception in Learning Economics Questionnaire (SPLEQ; Cronbach's $\alpha = .880-.969$), and analyzed through descriptive statistics and an independent-samples *t*-test. Overall perception ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.54$) fell in the High range, driven by strong interest and motivation ($M = 4.20$) and positive views of teaching methods ($M = 4.12$). Conceptual understanding and problem-solving were comparatively weak ($M = 3.60$), the lowest of the four dimensions. Boys reported significantly higher overall perception than girls, $t(148) = 4.229$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.69$. The findings suggest that while students in this tribal district find Economics interesting and view their teachers favorably, translating that interest into conceptual confidence and closing the gender gap in overall perception requires classroom practice, and gender-responsive support specifically, that current instruction has not yet been delivered.*

1. Introduction:

Whether a subject holds a student's attention through Class X or slides off them has less to do with the syllabus than with how the syllabus is received. Economics, as taught at the secondary level under the Board of Secondary Education (BSE), Odisha, makes this gap visible. A Class IX student in a government school in Rayagada district is asked to grasp per capita income, disguised as unemployment, the formal and informal credit sectors, and the difference between GDP and human development concepts delivered in a register of textbook Odia considerably removed from the Kui or Soura spoken at home. Whether that student engages with the subject or quietly disengages during those periods is not a peripheral question: it shapes board-exam performance in the near term, and, more durably, whether the student leaves secondary school believing Economics has any bearing on the life they live.

Perception is not a soft variable sitting downstream of "real" learning outcomes. It ranks among the stronger predictors of engagement and eventual achievement in the educational-psychology literature (Zaini et al., 2008; Robert & Owan, 2019). When students experience a subject as abstract, procedurally demanding, or disconnected from their material circumstances, effort drops and, in settings where dropout is already a live risk, some students stop attending altogether. This dynamic sharpens in rural and tribal contexts. Arsaythamby and Julinamary (2015), working with comparatively well-resourced Malaysian secondary students, found that only about 30% could correctly navigate applied, multi-step Economics questions despite reasonable command of definitions. In a district where textbooks sometimes arrive after the half-yearly examination and a single teacher may carry Economics alongside Geography and Civics, there was reason to expect that figure to be worse, though no data existed to confirm it.

That absence is the starting point of this study. A substantial international literature addresses student perception in Economics education spanning Malaysia, Nigeria, Albania, Romania, Pakistan, and the United States but almost none of it originates from India's tribal-majority districts, and none from Rayagada specifically. This omission matters because Rayagada is not interchangeable with "rural India" generally. It carries a specific socio-linguistic and economic texture, shaped by Kondh, Soura, and Paroja communities, forest- and agriculture-dependent livelihoods, uneven access to formal banking, and a school calendar that bends around seasonal agricultural labour. Findings from urban Malaysian or Nigerian classrooms cannot be assumed to transfer.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 gives this question additional weight. Its emphasis on experiential learning and contextualised teaching is meant to reshape instruction in exactly this kind of classroom. Whether that emphasis reaches students in Rayagada, or whether the pressure of an 80-mark theory examination continues to push instruction toward definitional coverage, is an empirical question this study is positioned to speak to through students' own reported experience of teaching method and classroom environment.

This study examined student perception of learning Economics along three lines: the overall level of perception among secondary students in Rayagada district; perception across four specific dimensions interest and motivation, teaching methods and classroom environment, conceptual understanding and problem-solving, and attitude toward perceived difficulty; and whether perception differs by gender, a question with direct bearing on documented patterns of female disengagement and dropout in tribal secondary education. Data were drawn from 150 students (83 boys, 67 girls) across four government secondary schools in Rayagada district, using a purpose-built bilingual instrument for this population.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study draws on three complementary frameworks. Zaini et al.'s (2008) four-factor structure of student attitude toward Economics perceived value, perceived difficulty, cognitive-skill confidence, and affective response provides the closest existing analogue to the dimensional structure this study measures and is treated here as the primary organizing framework for interpreting sub-scale variation. Sociolinguistic register theory (Halliday, 1978) frames the language dimension specific to this context: the distance between the formal, bureaucratic Odia of the BSE textbook and the conversational Odia, Kui, or Soura students speak outside the classroom constitutes an additional cognitive load layered on top of the Economics content itself, distinct from difficulty with the subject matter as such. Finally, insider-researcher reflexivity (Merton, 1972) frames the study's methodological stance: the researcher's own origin in Rayagada district shaped the bilingual questionnaire design and in-person Odia-medium administration and is treated throughout as a methodological asset requiring explicit acknowledgment rather than a source of bias to be concealed.

2.2 Perception, Achievement, and the Persistent Gap Between the Two

The premise that perception merits study independent of marks rests on a well-established distinction: a student can pass an examination through memorization without ever perceiving a subject as meaningful, and conversely, a positive orientation toward a subject can sustain engagement even where short-term performance lags. Becker (1997), writing on undergraduate Economics instruction, traced much of the field's retention problem to passive delivery students who copy notes and read textbooks but are rarely asked to reason with material or connect theory to real data. Walstad and Rebeck (2002) supply a corrective to any assumption that this is purely a resource problem: even in the well-funded, well-staffed U.S. system, high school students showed a persistent gap between expected and demonstrated economic understanding, and gains from formal coursework faded quickly. Read together, these findings suggest abstract, textbook-centred delivery undermines conceptual retention regardless of surrounding resource levels meaning infrastructural deficits in Rayagada should be read as compounding an already-documented pedagogical weakness rather than as its sole cause.

2.3 The Structure of Attitude, Difficulty, and Conceptual Confidence

Zaini et al. (2008), investigating why Malaysian university students repeatedly failed introductory Economics, identified the four-factor structure value, difficulty, cognitive skills, affect underlying this study's framework. Students who failed scored lower on all four dimensions, and perceived difficulty, together with gender, explained roughly 15% of the variance in exam performance. A secondary finding recurs later in this review: they found no significant gender difference in attitude across any dimension, despite female students outperforming male students academically evidence that attitude and achievement do not necessarily track the same group.

Hysa et al. (2017), surveying Albanian secondary students, add nuance to the difficulty question: their sample largely rejected the view that Economics is "too mathematical," recognising instead its connection to lived social issues such as poverty and unemployment, and a large majority associated the subject with strong career prospects yet this respect coexisted with continued avoidance of it as a field of specialisation. Perceived difficulty, in other words, can function as a barrier even when students do not consciously label the subject as mathematically forbidding; they can admire a discipline from a distance while finding its classroom instantiation alienating. This distinction is directly relevant to interpreting a pattern, reported in Section 5 below, in which Rayagada students report high interest alongside comparatively weaker conceptual confidence.

Arsaythamby and Julinamary (2015) narrow the difficulty question further, distinguishing three specific sub-skills among Malaysian pre-university students: symbolic notation, graphical interpretation, and applied problem-solving. Graphs proved least troublesome; symbols caused moderate difficulty; but only 30% of students could correctly integrate multiple concepts into a coherent problem-solving response, even where most could recite the relevant definitions individually. This finding bears directly on any curriculum, like BSE Odisha's, that regularly requires students to explain and apply concepts rather than merely define them.

2.4 Teaching Method, Classroom Relationship, and the Gender Question

Robert and Owan (2019), working with 1,800 secondary students in Cross River State, Nigeria, found that four components of perceived teacher effectiveness motivational skill, teaching method, the student-teacher relationship, and communication jointly predicted Economics achievement, with communication the strongest single factor ($F = 150.31, p < .05$). In a district where the distance between formal classroom Odia and a student's home language is already considerable, a teacher's willingness to draw locally recognisable examples wages at a nearby worksite, prices at the weekly market plausibly does more communicative work than it would in a linguistically homogeneous classroom.

The gender literature does not converge in a single direction, which is itself informative. Hartono et al. (2019, as cited in Nji & Chinyelogo, 2025) found female students showing higher general classroom engagement than male students; Nji and Chinyelogo (2025), studying Peer-Led Team Learning specifically, found the reverse male students

more engaged than female students within that instructional format; and Zaini et al.'s (2008) data, discussed above, found no significant gender difference in attitude at all. Read together, these findings support a context-dependent interpretation of gendered engagement rather than a fixed trait attributable to either group which matters directly here, because Rayagada carries structural conditions (longer or less safe travel distances for girls, heavier domestic responsibility, and in some families an implicit framing of a daughter's schooling as more provisional than a son's) that the reviewed literature, drawn overwhelmingly from urban or peri-urban settings, does not capture.

Domestic evidence remains thin. Sachdeva (2017), working with a single Delhi-NCR classroom of 37 students, found strikingly negative pre-intervention attitude scores toward Economics ($M = 2.35\text{--}2.82$ across three dimensions) that rose sharply after a six-session experiential module ($M = 3.70\text{--}3.75$), demonstrating that negative baseline perception in an Indian secondary classroom is not fixed. Its limitation in one urban classroom, no control group, no gender comparison, no tribal context is precisely the gap the present study addresses. Khatoon (2023), comparing traditional and constructivist teaching across 100 Kolkata secondary students, is not Economics-specific but supplies Indian, secondary-level evidence that active, student-centered instruction outperforms lecture-based teaching on both achievement ($t = 6.42, p < .01$) and engagement ($t = 7.13, p < .01$).

2.5 Research Gap

Three gaps emerge from this literature, each corresponding to one of this study's objectives. First, no published empirical work examines how secondary students in an Odisha tribal district perceive Economics specifically. Second, while several reviewed studies compare male and female students, none does so within the socio-cultural conditions of a tribal district, where educational access is already shaped by community norms and structural poverty in ways the reviewed samples largely urban and international do not experience. Third, the relationship between teaching method and student perception is comparatively well studied in Nigerian, Malaysian, and Albanian contexts but remains unexamined in rural Indian schools under the BSE Odisha curriculum, where an 80-mark theory / 20-mark internal-assessment structure shapes instructional pacing in a system-specific way. The present study addresses this gap through a purpose-built bilingual instrument administered to Class IX and X students in Rayagada district.

3. Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by three objectives: one to assess the overall level of perception toward learning Economics concepts among secondary school students in Rayagada district; two to analyses students' perception across four dimensions interest and motivation, teaching methods and classroom environment, conceptual understanding and problem-solving, and attitude toward perceived difficulty; and three to compare the perception of boys and girls toward learning Economics concepts at the overall scale level.

Objective 3 was tested against the following hypotheses, evaluated at $p < .05$ using an independent-samples t-test:

- **H₀:** There is no significant difference between the perceptions of secondary school boys and girls in Rayagada district toward learning Economics concepts.
- **H₁:** There is a significant difference between the perceptions of secondary school boys and girls in Rayagada district toward learning Economics concepts.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

A descriptive, cross-sectional survey design was adopted, suited to describing student perception as it currently exists in this context without manipulating any variable (Kothari, 2004), with data gathered at a single point in time.

4.2 Population, Sample, and Instrument

The population comprised students enrolled in Classes IX and X in government secondary schools within Rayagada district, Odisha; private schools, central government schools (Kendriya Vidyalaya, Navodaya Vidyalaya), and schools outside the district were excluded. A sample of 150 students (83 boys, 67 girls) was selected through purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018) from four government secondary schools within Rayagada district based on two inclusion criteria: enrolment in Class IX or X, and presence at school on the day of administration. The resulting gender imbalance (83 boys, 67 girls) reflects the schools' actual enrolment pattern at this level rather than a sampling artefact and is consistent with documented dropout pressures affecting girls in tribal secondary education in this region.

Data were collected using a self-developed instrument, the Students' Perception in Learning Economics Questionnaire (SPLEQ), written bilingually in Odia and English to remove language as a barrier to measurement itself. The instrument comprised 30 items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), organized into four sub-scales of unequal length (Table 1). Ten items (Q16-Q20, Q22, Q24-Q27) were negatively worded and reverse-scored prior to analysis, so that a higher score consistently indicated a more positive perception across all items. Sub-scale and overall scores were interpreted using a five-band scale: 4.50–5.00 (Very High), 3.50–4.49 (High), 2.50–3.49 (Moderate), 1.50–2.49 (Low), and 1.00–1.49 (Very Low). Internal consistency was excellent across all sub-scales, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .880 to .969 (overall scale $\alpha = .969$).

Table 1 *Structure and Focus of the SPLEQ*

Sub-Scale	Items	Focus Area	Reversed Items
A	Q1-Q5	Interest and Motivation	None
B	Q6-Q15	Teaching Methods & Classroom Environment	None
C	Q16-Q25	Conceptual Understanding & Problem-Solving	Q16-Q20, Q22, Q24, Q25
D	Q26-Q30	Attitude & Perceived Difficulty	Q26, Q27

4.3 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The questionnaire was administered in person by the researcher following institutional authorization from the Department of Education, Regional Institute of Education (RIE), Bhopal (notice dated 6 February 2026), and the

individual consent of each of the four participating school heads. Data collection took place between 11 and 20 February 2026. Given that students at this level are not permitted to carry mobile phones in school and an app-based approach was unsuitable for this age group, a paper-based, in-person format was used throughout, with verbal instructions delivered in Odia. Students were told explicitly that there were no right or wrong answers, that participation was voluntary, and that responses would not affect their academic records. Response sheets with more than three missing items on any single sub-scale were excluded prior to data entry; the final analytic sample of 150 reflects this screening. Anonymity was maintained throughout the world. No names were recorded, and each respondent was assigned a numerical ID.

4.4 Statistical Analysis

Data was entered and analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics v20. Objective 1 was addressed through descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, maximum) for the Overall Perception Score, together with a frequency distribution across the five interpretive bands. Objective 2 was addressed through descriptive statistics computed separately for each of the four sub-scale mean scores. Objective 3 was addressed through an independent-samples t-test comparing boys' and girls' Overall Perception Scores, with Levene's Test for Equality of Variances examined prior to interpreting the t-statistic; significance was judged at $p < .05$.

5. Results

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the Overall Perception Score and each of the four sub-scale areas.

Table 2 *Dimension-Wise Summary of Student Perception (N = 150)*

Dimension	M	SD	Min	Max	Level	Notable Pattern
A: Interest & Motivation	4.20	0.48	3.20	5.00	High	Strongest dimension; no student scored below Moderate
B: Teaching Methods & Classroom Environment	4.12	0.45	3.20	4.90	High	Tight spread; consistent across students
C: Conceptual Understanding & Problem-Solving	3.60	0.70	1.90	4.80	High (lowest mean)	Widest spread; only sub-scale with a minimum below 2.00
D: Attitude & Perceived Difficulty	3.94	0.63	2.60	5.00	High	Numerical-problem anxiety (Q27) pulls scores down for some students
Overall Perception Score (40-item mean)	3.96	0.54	2.80	4.93	High	Interest strongest, conceptual understanding weakest of the four dimensions

5.1 Overall Level of Perception

The mean Overall Perception Score across all 150 students was 3.96 (SD = 0.54), placing the sample in the High perception band. No student scored in the Low or Very Low categories: 88 students (58.7%) fell in the High band, 32 (21.3%) in Very High, and 30 (20.0%) in Moderate. This distribution held despite the infrastructural and

linguistic constraints characteristic of this setting Odia-medium instruction, textbooks that sometimes arrive late, and a curriculum register several steps removed from students' home languages suggesting negative perception of Economics is not the dominant experience in this sample.

5.2 Dimension-Wise Perception

The four dimensions did not follow a uniform pattern, ranking, from strongest to weakest: Interest and Motivation ($M = 4.20$) > Teaching Methods and Classroom Environment ($M = 4.12$) > Attitude and Perceived Difficulty ($M = 3.94$) > Conceptual Understanding and Problem-Solving ($M = 3.60$). Sub-Scale A recorded no scores below the Moderate band, indicating near-universal baseline interest in the subject. Sub-Scale C, by contrast, showed both the lowest mean and the widest spread ($SD = 0.70$) of the four dimensions, with a minimum score of 1.90 the only sub-scale minimum below 2.00 indicating that difficulty with applied conceptual material, rather than disinterest, is concentrated among a specific subset of students rather than distributed evenly across the sample. The 0.60-point gap between Sub-Scale A and Sub-Scale C is the most consequential pattern in the dimension-wise data: students are, on the whole, interested in Economics and respond positively to their teachers, but that interest does not translate uniformly into confidence with applied, multi-step reasoning a pattern consistent with Arsaythamby and Julinamary's (2015) finding that problem-solving, specifically, is the hardest component of Economics learning to master.

5.3 Gender-Wise Comparison of Overall Perception

Table 3 *Independent-Samples t-Test: Overall Perception Score by Gender*

Group		N	M	SD	SE Mean		
Boys		83	4.12	0.51	0.056		
Girls		67	3.77	0.52	0.063		
Levene's F	Levene's p	t	df	p (two-tailed)	Mean Diff.	95% CI	Cohen's d
.001	.972	4.229	148	< .001	0.356	[.189, .522]	0.69

Levene's test was non-significant ($F = .001$, $p = .972$), indicating comparable variance between the two groups, so the equal-variances-assumed statistic was used. Boys reported significantly higher overall perception ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.51$) than girls ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.52$), $t(148) = 4.229$, $p < .001$, a difference approaching a large effect by conventional benchmarks (Cohen's $d = 0.69$). The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference [.189, .522] does not include zero. The null hypothesis of no gender difference is therefore rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis.

6. Discussion

The overall pattern high interest and positive views of teaching, set against comparatively weaker conceptual confidence echoes a distinction drawn earlier in Hysa et al.'s (2017) Albanian data: students can respect and engage with a subject in principle while finding its more demanding classroom applications harder to access. Read through

Zaini et al.'s (2008) four-factor lens, the Rayagada data show value and affect (captured jointly here in Sub-Scale A) running well ahead of cognitive-skill confidence (Sub-Scale C) the same asymmetry Zaini et al. identified as the strongest single predictor of exam outcomes in their sample, which suggests Sub-Scale C is not merely the weakest dimension descriptively but plausibly the one most consequential for downstream academic performance, a relationship this cross-sectional design cannot itself test but future longitudinal work could.

The specific content of Sub-Scale C's weakest items is consistent with Arsaythamby and Julinamary's (2015) finding that applied, multi-step problem-solving is harder than definitional recall: BSE Odisha's Class IX–X content per capita income, disguised unemployment, the role of collateral in formal credit asks students to connect abstract relationships (production and income, informal credit and poverty, GDP and living standards) rather than reproduce isolated facts, and does so in a textbook register that, per sociolinguistic register theory (Halliday, 1978), sits at some remove from students' spoken Odia, Kui, or Soura. That register gap plausibly compounds rather than substitutes for the conceptual demand itself, though the present design cannot separate the two sources of difficulty statistically.

The gender finding adds Indian tribal-district evidence to a literature that, as reviewed in Section 2.4, does not converge on a single direction for gendered engagement (Hartono et al., 2019, as cited in Nji & Chinyelogo, 2025; Nji & Chinyelogo, 2025; Zaini et al., 2008). That the gap in this sample favours boys and is both statistically and practically meaningful ($d = 0.69$), should not be read as evidence that girls are less interested in the subject. Sub-Scale A data, not disaggregated by gender in this analysis, showed near-ceiling interest across the sample as a whole. It is more consistent with a confidence and access gap layered onto comparable underlying interest, echoing the broader concern in Indian educational research about confidence gaps for girls in analytically demanding subjects, while acknowledging that Economics is not mathematics and the parallel should not be overextended.

7. Implications and Recommendations

For classroom practice, the gap between Sub-Scale A and Sub-Scale C points toward a specific and addressable target: not more instructional time on Economics generally, but structured, low-stakes problem-solving practice built into regular class time, anchored in locally recognizable examples Self Help Group loan mechanics in place of abstract formal-credit descriptions, primary/secondary/tertiary sector classification using occupations students already recognize in their own families.

For gender-responsive practice, the internal-assessment component of the current BSE Odisha structure (20 of 100 marks) offers a legitimate, already-available space for teachers to credit classroom participation and small-group problem-solving explicitly, with deliberate attention to building girls' analytical engagement rather than assuming it will develop unprompted. For curriculum and language policy, a classroom-level glossary bridging formal textbook Odia with conversational Odia and, where feasible, local tribal-language equivalents represent a low-cost

intervention consistent with this study's finding that conceptual difficulty and linguistic distance likely compound one another.

For research infrastructure, the SPLEQ's demonstrated reliability ($\alpha = .880-.969$) and bilingual design suggest it could serve, in adapted form, as a low-cost, reusable district-level diagnostic tool for RIE Bhopal or SCERT Odisha, administered periodically to flag schools where conceptual-understanding scores lag interest scores.

8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is limited by its confinement to four schools within a single block of one district, so findings should be read as indicative of this specific context rather than generalizable to Rayagada district as a whole or to tribal districts generally. The cross-sectional design captures perception at a single point in time (February 2026) and cannot establish whether Sub-Scale C's weaker scores predict downstream board-examination performance. Reliance on self-report data is a further limitation common to perception research generally. Future work would benefit from a multi-district comparative design across other tribal blocks in Odisha, a mixed-methods follow-up combining SPLEQ data with classroom observation and interviews to explain the gender gap's underlying mechanism, longitudinal tracking linking SPLEQ scores to subsequent board-examination outcomes, and a companion teacher-perception study examining whether Economics teachers in this block share students' assessment of where the curriculum's demands exceed current classroom support.

9. Conclusion

This study sets out to determine how secondary school students in a tribal district of Odisha perceive learning Economics, and the answer is, in comparable terms to Sahu and Hasan's (2026) parallel finding on teacher preparedness for NCFSE 2023, encouraging in some respects and cautionary in others. Students in this sample are interested in Economics, see it as connected to their lives, and view their teachers favourably. They are considerably less confident in the subject's more demanding applied and conceptual content, and girls report meaningfully lower overall perception than boys despite comparable underlying interest. This is not, on this evidence, a picture of disengagement; it is a picture of engagement that current classroom practice has not yet fully supported into conceptual confidence, particularly for girls. If Economics is to serve the students of Rayagada district as more than a subject to be passed, the institutions responsible for supporting these classrooms teacher-training programmes, school leadership, and curriculum design bodies alike will need to close that gap with the same seriousness the National Education Policy 2020 brings to reimagining how the subject is meant to be taught.

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