Bridging Barriers: Educational Challenges and Policy Framework for the Socio-Economic Upliftment of Gujjar and Bakarwal Tribes in Jammu and Kashmir.

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Abstract

Inclusive learning environments aim to provide equal access to educational opportunities for all children, regardless of gender, learning style, ability, race, religion, or ethnicity. Such environments ensure that every student is treated with safety, respect, and dignity, fostering a sense of belonging and recognition. Creating an inclusive classroom involves addressing and eliminating harmful stereotypes and biases tied to any identifying trait. It encourages the acceptance of students previously marginalized as integral members of the learning community, enhancing their self-worth and empowering them as individuals.

In today's rapidly changing world, the principles of equity and diversity are pivotal in education. Equity ensures the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and support, taking into account the unique needs and circumstances of individuals to provide everyone with a genuine chance to succeed. Unlike equality, which offers identical resources to all, equity focuses on tailoring interventions to help students reach their full potential. Diversity celebrates the rich variety of cultural, social, and demographic backgrounds, recognizing the unique contributions and challenges each individual brings to the classroom.

The Gujjar-Bakarwal tribe of Jammu and Kashmir represents one of the most underprivileged communities in the region, enduring educational, economic, political, and social marginalization since India's independence in 1947. This community faces significant barriers to education, including poor literacy rates, limited access to schools, migratory lifestyles, and a lack of awareness among parents about the importance of education. As a result, Gujjar-Bakarwal students experience unique challenges compared to other ethnic groups and the mainstream population.

This paper explores the educational challenges faced by Gujjar-Bakarwal students, focusing on the vision for equity and inclusivity outlined in the National Education Policy 2020. It also examines the government's strategies for addressing the needs of this community and provides policy recommendations to enhance the teaching-learning process for Gujjar-Bakarwal students. The study draws on secondary data sources, including research papers, journals, books, government reports, news articles, and other relevant documents.

Key Words

- Inclusive learning environments
- Equity and diversity in education
- National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020)
- Gujjar and Bakarwal tribes
- Educational challenges
- Socio-economic upliftment
- Jammu and Kashmir
- Migratory lifestyle

- Mother-tongue education
- Language barriers
- Seasonal migration
- Poverty and education
- Government educational policies
- Tribal students
- Scheduled Tribes (STs)
- Gender bias in education
- Educational facilities and infrastructure
- Special Education Zones (SEZs)
- Multilingualism in education
- Gojri language
- Scholarships for tribal students
- Hostels for tribal students
- Ashram schools
- Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)
- Mobile schools
- Educational policy recommendations
- Parental literacy and guidance
- Community role models
- Early marriage and education
- Social discrimination in schools
- Literacy rate among Gujjar and Bakarwal tribes
- Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship (RGNF)
- Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs)
- Midday Meal Scheme
- Tribal education development
- Institutional framework for tribal welfare
- Educational equity
- Economic barriers to education

Introduction

Tribal communities form an integral part of Indian society, weaving their unique identity into the cultural mosaic of the nation. Comprising 8.6% of India's population, tribal people hold significant value in shaping the diverse heritage of the country. In Jammu and Kashmir, Gujjars and Bakarwals rank as the third-largest ethnic group, following Kashmiris and Dogras. According to the 2011 Census, 11.9% of the Union Territory's population belongs to the tribal category, with Gujjars and Bakarwals constituting the most primitive among them.

Despite the era of modernization, the Gujjar and Bakarwal tribes of Jammu and Kashmir remain socially, economically, and educationally marginalized, which poses a grave concern. These tribes predominantly reside in remote, rugged, and mountainous terrains near forests, where access to basic amenities such as roads, electricity, medical facilities, clean drinking water, and education remains a challenge. The absence of these essential services exacerbates the difficulties faced by these communities.

Education plays a pivotal role in the development of any community, serving as a marker of societal progress. Jammu and Kashmir is home to diverse communities, each distinguished by its unique identity. Among them, the Scheduled Tribes (STs) enrich the cultural diversity of the region. In 1989 and 1991, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir granted Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to Gujjars and Bakarwals under the Amendment Acts. According to the 2011 Census, the Gujjars and Bakarwals constitute approximately 73.2% of the 12 Scheduled Tribes in Jammu and Kashmir, with populations of 980,654 and 113,198, respectively, out of a total ST population of 1,493,299.

Though these tribes are indigenous to all districts of Jammu and Kashmir, their concentration is primarily in the districts of Poonch and Rajouri. Formerly, when Jammu and Kashmir included Ladakh, the twin tribes of Gujjars and Bakarwals shared similar language, customs, and culture. The distinction between the two lies in their occupations: Gujjars primarily engage in agriculture and buffalo rearing, while Bakarwals focus on raising sheep and goats.

For generations, these communities have prioritized their ancestral occupations over formal education, considering their livelihoods a legacy to be preserved and passed down. However, their migratory lifestyle poses a significant barrier to education, alongside other socio-economic and infrastructural challenges. Addressing these educational deficiencies is crucial for the advancement and integration of the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities into the broader socio-economic framework of the region.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the challenges faced by Gujjar and Bakarwal students in accessing and engaging with education.
- To analyze the vision of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) regarding equity and inclusivity in education.
- To assess the government's strategies aimed at addressing the educational needs of Gujjar and Bakarwal students.
- To propose policy recommendations for overcoming the issues and challenges faced by Gujjar and Bakarwal students in their educational journey.

Research Methodology

This study is both explanatory and descriptive in nature, focusing on empirical research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Gujjar and Bakarwal students in their educational pursuits. It also examines the government's strategies for addressing the needs of these students while promoting equity and inclusivity for marginalized social and economic groups.

The research relies entirely on secondary data sources. These include official government reports, census data, research papers, academic journals, books, magazines, websites, news articles, and news reports. By analyzing these resources, the study explores key issues, challenges, strategies, and policy recommendations to improve the educational experiences of Gujjar and Bakarwal students.

Issues and Challenges in Learning Among Gujjar and Bakarwal Students

Gujjar and Bakarwal students in Jammu and Kashmir face numerous challenges in accessing and benefiting from education. These challenges, deeply rooted in socio-economic and structural factors, include:

4.1 Language Barriers

A significant number of Gujjar and Bakarwal students struggle with understanding classroom instruction due to language barriers. Most schools lack teachers proficient in Gojri, the mother tongue of the community. As a result, pre-primary and primary students often fail to grasp lessons, leading to higher dropout rates. The Gujjar and Bakarwal community, one of the largest ethnic groups in Jammu and Kashmir, has a unique language, culture, and identity. However, the lack of resources for basic education in Gojri is a major contributor to their low literacy rates. Research underscores the importance of mother-tongue education in supporting cognitive development, improving communication skills, and creating an emotional bond between the child and their learning environment.

4.2 Shortage of Teachers Proficient in Gojri

Schools serving Gujjar and Bakarwal students often lack teachers who can teach in Gojri. While teachers from other communities contribute significantly, their inability to communicate in the students' native language creates confusion and hampers learning. In some tribal-dominated areas, the exclusive use of Gojri further complicates the situation, as students struggle to understand lessons and are sometimes penalized for their lack

of comprehension. Introducing teachers proficient in Gojri in schools catering to this community would bridge the linguistic gap and improve learning outcomes.

4.3 Seasonal Migration

The nomadic lifestyle of the Gujjar and Bakarwal community, driven by the need to find pastures for their livestock, disrupts children's education. During the summer months, approximately six lakh Gujjar-Bakarwals migrate, causing children to drop out of school for extended periods.

Although mobile schools were introduced in 1970 to address this issue, challenges such as limited infrastructure and the impact of militancy in the 1990s hindered their effectiveness. While some mobile schools resumed operations after 2000, they provide only short-term education with minimal resources. Students often face difficulties catching up with the curriculum upon returning to regular schools, leading to frustration and higher dropout rates.

4.4 Poverty

Economic hardship is a significant barrier to education for Gujjar and Bakarwal families. Many households cannot afford school fees, uniforms, or basic supplies, forcing children to abandon their education. A survey conducted by the Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation (TRCF) revealed that approximately 66% of nomadic Gujjars and Bakarwals in Jammu and Kashmir live below the poverty line. These families often lack basic necessities such as food, healthcare, clean drinking water, and adequate shelter.

4.5 Lack of Awareness

Awareness about government educational policies and programs among Gujjar and Bakarwal communities is minimal. Due to their residence in remote and isolated areas near forests and mountains, they have limited access to information about schemes designed to support their education. Poor infrastructure, including a lack of schools, hospitals, and other public services, exacerbates the situation. Additionally, extreme poverty, widespread illiteracy, corruption in implementing agencies, and the nomadic lifestyle further contribute to the community's lack of understanding and engagement with these programs. As a result, many Gujjar and Bakarwal families fail to benefit from the initiatives intended to improve their education and living conditions.

Issues and Challenges in Learning Among Gujjar and Bakarwal Students

4.6. Low Literacy Rate of Parents

The literacy rate among Scheduled Tribes (STs) in Jammu and Kashmir is significantly lower than the national average, standing at 50.6%, with male literacy at 60.6% and female literacy at just 39.7% (Census 2011). Gujjars and Bakarwals, in particular, have one of the lowest literacy rates among STs. Children of illiterate parents often struggle academically due to the lack of parental guidance and support in their studies. Illiterate parents are unable to monitor their children’s progress, read school diaries, or engage with teachers, as they are often preoccupied with their livestock. This low parental literacy, coupled with frequent migration, perpetuates the cycle of poor academic performance, high dropout rates, and educational stagnation.

4.7. Communication Gap

Due to a lack of confidence and proficiency in mainstream languages, Gujjar and Bakarwal communities struggle to participate in government programs, advocate for their rights, or access public services such as education. This communication gap further marginalizes them from opportunities for social and educational advancement.

4.8. Social Discrimination

Social discrimination remains a significant barrier to education for Gujjar and Bakarwal students. Pastoralist children often face derogatory remarks from teachers and peers, being labeled with names such as "jungli," "gujjru," or "dehati." Such discriminatory behavior erodes their self-esteem and discourages them from attending school, creating a sense of alienation and inferiority.

4.9. Gender Bias

Girls from Gujjar and Bakarwal communities face greater educational challenges than boys. While families may leave their sons in residential schools or with relatives during migration, they are often reluctant to do so for daughters due to concerns about safety and societal norms. This gender disparity further limits the educational opportunities for tribal girls, perpetuating cycles of inequality.

4.10. Lack of Educational Facilities and Infrastructure

Many Gujjar and Bakarwal areas lack schools altogether, and where schools exist, enrollment rates are low. Seasonal schools are often under-resourced, lacking basic facilities such as electricity, connectivity, and weatherproof tents. Classes are held in poor conditions, with students from various age groups studying together. Teachers face challenges in catering to diverse learning levels, as many students are first-time learners. These infrastructural shortcomings hinder the learning process and discourage students from continuing their education.

4.11. Shortage of Qualified Teachers in Seasonal Schools

The Jammu and Kashmir Education Department employs volunteers to teach in seasonal schools. However, these volunteers often lack the qualifications to teach beyond primary levels, as many have not completed higher secondary education themselves. While the stipend for these volunteers has increased from INR 4,000 to INR 10,000, the lack of job security and low pay deter qualified candidates from joining. This shortage of skilled teachers affects the quality of education provided in seasonal schools.

4.12. Early Marriage

The tradition of early marriage among Gujjar and Bakarwal communities is a significant factor contributing to high dropout rates, particularly among girls. Children between the ages of 10 and 18 are often withdrawn from school to prepare for marriage. A 2015 survey by the Tribal Research and Cultural Foundation (TRCF) revealed that 89% of community members marry their children between the ages of 14 and 18. While the practice of marrying at younger ages (below 14) has declined, it remains prevalent enough to deprive many girls of an education.

This practice stems from cultural norms, including the belief that girls are a liability and should be married early to secure a suitable match. The societal taboo against remaining unmarried also contributes to the continuation of early marriages. Reformers argue that girls from second-generation educated families are more likely to complete their education, highlighting the need for systemic changes to break this cycle.

The National Educational Policy 2020's Vision for Equity and Inclusivity

The National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to address the growing inequalities and injustices in India's education system. Recognizing the significant dropout rates among vulnerable minorities and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, the policy aims to create a more inclusive and equitable education system. It highlights systemic barriers such as limited school infrastructure, low girl-child engagement in rural areas, and unmet educational needs of children in geographically challenging regions. NEP 2020 provides actionable recommendations to ensure inclusive education for all.

5.1. Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs)

NEP 2020 introduces the concept of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) to address the educational needs of underrepresented communities. These groups include classifications based on gender, socio-cultural identity, geographical location, disabilities, and economic status. The policy acknowledges that historical exclusion, geographical inaccessibility, and socio-economic disparities lead to higher dropout rates among these groups.

To promote inclusivity, NEP 2020 recommends targeted interventions such as:

- **Conditional cash transfers** and **targeted scholarships** to incentivize education.
- **Distribution of bicycles** for transportation, which has proven to increase enrollment.
- Enhanced representation of SEDGs through tailored programs and resources.

5.2. Recognizing Gendered Identities

NEP 2020 identifies girls and transgender individuals as some of the most vulnerable groups in the education system. To address their challenges, the policy proposes measures that ensure safety, inclusivity, and accessibility, including:

- Formation of **cycling clubs** and **walking groups** to facilitate safe school commutes.
- Establishment of a **Gender-Inclusion Fund** to improve the learning environment for girls and transgender students. States will use this fund to implement initiatives like bicycle distribution, conditional cash transfers, and sanitary provisions.
- Expansion of **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas** to provide enhanced boarding facilities and address regional barriers to education for girls.
- Promotion of community-based programs to tackle specific barriers to education for female and transgender students.

5.3. Recognition of Individuals with Special Needs

NEP 2020 aligns with the **Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016** and emphasizes the integration of students with special needs into mainstream education. Key provisions include:

- Hiring **special educators** in all school complexes to ensure inclusive and sensitive instruction.
- Allowing children with developmental impairments the option of **homeschooling** with access to qualified teachers and learning resources.
- Training teachers to recognize learning difficulties early, support academic success, and address emotional health.
- Establishing the **National Assessment Centre, PARAKH**, to create fair assessment procedures for students with learning difficulties.
- Proposing alternative educational methods and approaches to ensure the holistic development of children with special needs.

By addressing systemic barriers, promoting inclusivity, and focusing on equity, NEP 2020 envisions a transformative education system that benefits all, particularly those from marginalized and disadvantaged communities.

5.4. Establishment of Special Education Zones (SEZs)

The National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020 recommends the establishment of **Special Education Zones (SEZs)** in areas with a significant population of socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) and in aspirational districts. The primary goal of these zones is to extend education to India's most remote and underdeveloped regions. By allocating additional funds and coordinating federal and state initiatives, the SEZs aim to address the educational needs of marginalized communities effectively.

While the concept of SEZs holds transformative potential, NEP 2020 does not yet define clear criteria for their establishment or differentiation between urban and rural areas, leaving ambiguity in their implementation. Nonetheless, SEZs are envisioned as a key mechanism to ensure equitable educational access across geographically inaccessible and socio-economically disadvantaged regions.

5.5. Focus on Multilingualism

NEP 2020 emphasizes **multilingualism** and the use of familiar languages for instruction up to at least Grade 5, ideally continuing to Grade 8 and beyond. Educators are encouraged to develop textbooks and teaching materials in students' mother tongues to facilitate effective communication and learning. This approach not only enhances cognitive development but also strengthens students' emotional connection with their education.

Summary of NEP 2020's Vision for Equity and Inclusivity

NEP 2020 demonstrates a strong commitment to addressing the educational challenges faced by minorities, children with special needs, and gendered identities. By introducing innovative measures such as SEZs and promoting mother-tongue education, it takes significant steps toward inclusivity. However, the policy has limitations, such as insufficient focus on the unique challenges of traditional groups like Dalits and Tribals and the lack of clarity on affirmative action for certain categories. Addressing these gaps will be critical to advancing equity and inclusion for marginalized communities.

6. Government's Strategies for Addressing the Needs of Gujjar-Bakarwal Students and Promoting Equity

The government has implemented various strategies and initiatives to support the educational needs of Gujjar-Bakarwal students and promote inclusivity:

6.1. Pre- and Post-Matric Scholarships

Scholarships for Scheduled Tribe (ST) students help reduce financial barriers to education. Pre-matric scholarships are available for Gujjar-Bakarwal students in Jammu and Kashmir, while post-matric scholarships are centrally sponsored to support higher education.

6.2. Merit Improvement Programs

Special coaching programs are provided to enhance the academic performance of tribal students and improve their merit.

6.3. Gujjar-Bakarwal Girls' Hostels

Financial assistance is offered for the construction and renovation of hostels for tribal girls, ensuring safe and conducive living conditions for their education.

6.4. Gujjar-Bakarwal Boys' Hostels

Hostels for tribal boys are also being constructed to provide housing and educational support for students from remote areas.

6.5. Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship (RGNF) Scheme

This scheme provides grants to tribal students pursuing research studies in higher education, enabling them to advance academically.

6.6. Top-Class Education Scheme for Tribal Students

The program aims to motivate deserving and meritorious tribal students to pursue further education by providing access to top-class educational institutions.

6.7. Ashram Schools

The Ashram School scheme offers residential facilities for tribal students, from primary to senior secondary levels, in tribal sub-plan areas. This initiative includes infrastructure development and staff support.

6.8. National Overseas Scholarships

Tribal students pursuing higher education abroad are eligible for financial assistance under this program.

6.9. Free Coaching Programs

Free coaching is provided to tribal students to help them prepare for state and central-level competitive exams.

6.10. Strengthening Tribal Girls' Education

Specific programs target tribal girls in low-literacy districts to increase enrolment and retention, aiming to close the literacy gap.

6.11. Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)

These flagship schools in Jammu and Kashmir offer quality education to tribal children in remote areas, ensuring their holistic development.

6.12. Midday Meal Scheme

Launched in 1995, this centrally sponsored initiative aims to reduce classroom hunger and improve the nutritional status of elementary school students.

6.13. Mobile Schools

Mobile schools were introduced to provide basic education to nomadic Gujjar-Bakarwal children, addressing their migratory lifestyle.

6.14. Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs)

KGBVs offer residential and educational facilities for girls from disadvantaged groups (SC, ST, OBC, minorities, BPL families) in Classes VI-XII. The initiative promotes girls' transition from elementary to secondary and higher secondary education in educationally backward blocks.

6.15. Institutional Framework

The **Directorate of Tribal Welfare** in Jammu and Kashmir was established in 2008 to oversee tribal education and development initiatives. Surveys are conducted to assess literacy levels and create comprehensive education plans for tribal students.

6.16. First Transhumant Survey

The 2021 survey on migratory populations revealed stark educational challenges, with literacy rates as low as 16.74% among a population of 6.12 lakh. This underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the educational needs of the Gujjar-Bakarwal community.

The government's multifaceted approach, including scholarships, infrastructure development, and institutional support, reflects a commitment to improving the educational outcomes of Gujjar-Bakarwal students. However, sustained efforts and tailored strategies are essential to address the persistent challenges faced by these communities.

7. Policy Suggestions

7.1. Availability of Mobile Schools

The government should ensure the availability of mobile schools in all regions where Gujjars and Bakarwals reside to address the challenges posed by their nomadic lifestyle.

7.2. Tribal Language Curriculum

Primary school curricula and instructional materials should be developed in tribal languages, while middle and secondary school curricula should incorporate regional languages.

7.3. Access to Educational Facilities

The government must guarantee access to open and inclusive educational facilities for nomadic tribes, ensuring that no child is left behind.

7.4. Temporary Educational Facilities

Temporary educational facilities should be established in the higher elevations of the Pir Panjal mountain range to serve migratory communities during their seasonal movements.

7.5. Native Language Instruction

Children should be taught in their native language during primary and secondary school years to enhance comprehension and cognitive development.

7.6. Qualified Teachers for ST Schools

The government must prioritize hiring qualified teachers for schools serving Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities, preferably from the community itself.

7.7. Establishment of Gojri Departments

Separate Gojri language departments should be established in colleges and universities to promote and preserve the linguistic heritage of the Gujjar-Bakarwal community.

7.8. Gojri in Higher Education

Teaching and learning of Gojri should be made mandatory at undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) levels in institutions of higher education.

7.9. Introduction of Gojri Textbooks

The government should introduce Gojri textbooks in government schools from Grades 1 to 12 to support native language learning.

7.10. Parental Guidance and Counseling

Awareness programs should be initiated to educate parents about the importance of education and the government schemes available for their children. Sharing information locally can address the issue of limited awareness among tribal communities.

7.11. Community Role Models

Educated members of the tribal community should step forward to serve as role models and mentors, inspiring the younger generation to pursue education.

Conclusion

The Indian Constitution has provided extensive safeguards for the rights and welfare of tribal communities, including the Gujjar and Bakarwal tribes. Since independence, efforts have been made to address their political, economic, and educational needs. While significant initiatives like scholarships, hostels, and free educational materials have been implemented, the educational progress of these communities remains limited.

The lack of focus on integrating their traditional skills with available natural resources and the persistent issues of poverty, superstition, seasonal migration, and geographic isolation continue to hinder their development. Language barriers, including the absence of textbooks and qualified teachers proficient in their mother tongue, further exacerbate the problem.

Article 46 of the Indian Constitution mandates special attention to the educational and economic advancement of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. To fulfill this constitutional spirit, focused and practical steps must be taken to address the challenges faced by the Gujjar and Bakarwalcommunities. If adequate measures are implemented to resolve these issues, significant progress can be achieved in improving their educational outcomes and overall quality of life.

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