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## Access and affordability in higher education: A study of nomadic tribes of Jammu and Kashmir

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### Abstract

The current paper attempts to examine and comprehend the reasons for low literacy level, higher dropout rate and lack of proper education among Nomadic tribes of Jammu and Kashmir. This paper discusses the current scenario of the educational level of the Nomadic community as well as the role of government institutions and their programmes. Many of the programs did not benefit the tribal community because the programmes were not contextualized and localized considering regional, geographical and physical differences and obstacles. Other reasons for not getting the benefits of the programs by the nomads are lack of political will, issues of affordability and accessibility, and lesser attention on the development of tribal areas. The objective of the current paper is to highlight the status of higher education among the nomadic tribes of Jammu and Kashmir, various initiatives taken by the government to promote education among the nomadic tribes and the challenges faced by them to achieve higher education.

**Keywords:** Tribes, nomads, nomadism, marginalization, deprivation, representation and education

### Introduction

Jammu and Kashmir has a huge population of Nomads. As per the official figures of the Tribal Department of UT of Jammu and Kashmir, around six lakh people still practice transhumance<sup>[1]</sup>. Majority of them are Gujjars and Bakarwals. The seasonal migration of Gujjars and Bakarwals is an important aspect of their culture and has been practiced for generations. It allows them to sustain their livelihood by providing their animals with fresh grazing lands. However, this seasonal migration often poses significant challenges to the education of children of these nomadic communities.

Problems faced by the Gujjar and Bakarwal tribe is the limited no of reserved seats in the universities. Competing with the mainstream population is still a challenge for them because meritocracy is meaningless without equality of opportunity. The tribal population is a pastoral and agro-pastoral community and pursuing higher education means losing the sole means of livelihood they are dependent upon. Another problem is the lack of fellowships to pursue research in universities and other research institutes in the country. If they somehow complete their Post doctorate they are not able to get jobs in universities and colleges as most of the reserved seats are converted into unreserved categories. Parents are also not in a position to support their children in higher education due to uncertainty in their carrier. Racial discrimination is also a big factor that hinders their entry in higher education.

Nomadic communities in Jammu and Kashmir constitute a small portion of the total population with their indigenous culture, language and their unique lifestyle<sup>[2]</sup>. Nomads in Jammu and Kashmir are marginalized, underprivileged and deprived in some way or the other. Only education could enable them to cast off this oppression of centuries.

### Challenges faced in Higher Education

Jammu and Kashmir has a significant population of nomadic tribes, including the Gujjars and Bakarwals. The Gujjars and Bakarwals are nomadic tribes in Jammu and Kashmir who practice seasonal migration with their herds of livestock. This migration pattern involves moving from the highland pastures in the summer to the lower-lying areas in the winter. However, this seasonal migration often poses significant challenges to the education of children of these communities. As per the official figures of the government of Jammu and Kashmir around six lakh people still practice seasonal migration.

Despite their significant numbers, nomadic communities in Jammu and Kashmir face a range of challenges related to education, health, and socio-economic status <sup>[3]</sup>.

Nomadic Tribes of Jammu and Kashmir often face significant challenges in terms of access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities due to a variety of reasons, including their lifestyle of transhumance, lack of infrastructure, and the discrimination they face in the society. They live in remote and marginalized areas, where infrastructure and other basic services are inadequate or non-existent. These factors have contributed to a cycle of poverty, where they struggle to meet their basic needs and lack the resources to improve their living conditions. Additionally, some nomads prioritize their traditional practice of transhumance over settling in one place, which can make it challenging for them to access to education or other services. It's also posing challenges for the government to provide basic services like healthcare and education particularly in upper areas of high-altitude pastures also called Dhooks where they spent summers <sup>[4]</sup>.

One of the primary reasons nomadic Tribes of J&K struggle to receive education is due to their practice of seasonal migration. Nomads move from place to place frequently, making it challenging for them to attend schools regularly. Additionally, many schools may not be accessible or available in the remote areas where nomads tend to live.

Large section of the nomadic community is still not properly represented at higher education level. Owing to their unique lifestyle of transhumance they are not getting quality basic education. Therefore, dropout rate amongst the nomadic tribe of Jammu and Kashmir is highest. Because they are constantly on move, they are not getting proper education. Government of Jammu and Kashmir came up with a unique policy of mobile school for nomadic Gujjar Bakarwals. But these mobile schools lack basic facilities like proper building, toilets, drinking water etc. In the lower plains mobile schools can be provided with the basic facilities because their location is fix and geotagged. When contact regarding reforms in the mobile schools few of the teachers suggested that tents and solar lights can be provided in the upper reaches in the Dhooks or pastures and proper buildings with basic facilities in the lower plains where they spent the winters. Teachers working in the mobile schools are not properly incentivised. Other departments which go to the upper reaches with the nomads are provided with extra allowances like travel allowances. But teachers are not getting extra allowances. They should be incentivised as they work in the harsh conditions. In most of these schools there is only one teacher who teaches all the subjects. Subject specific expert teachers should also be provided as it will help provide quality education and thereby students outcome will also improve <sup>[5]</sup>.

Basic education is the foundation upon which higher education is built. Students of these nomadic communities do not receive a strong foundation in basic education. They struggle to keep up with the academic demands of higher education. Moreover, poor basic education also affects student's confidence and motivation needed to succeed in higher education. Therefore, it is essential to prioritize and invest in basic education of the children of nomadic tribes to ensure that students have a strong foundation upon which they can build their future education and career paths. This includes providing well-trained teachers, adequate resources, and supportive learning environments. By

improving basic education, we can help students build a strong foundation for their academic and personal development and ensure that they are better equipped to succeed in higher education and beyond.

Lack of infrastructure is another barrier to education for these nomadic communities. Many tribal and nomadic communities live in remote and inaccessible areas where basic infrastructure such as schools, roads, and healthcare facilities are lacking. This is one of the major reasons behind lack of access to educational facilities. Schools are not available on the upper reaches or are too far away from their pastures. As a result, children from these communities may not have access to formal education or may have to travel long distances to attend school, which can be difficult and expensive for families. Furthermore, they also face discrimination or social exclusion that limits their access to education <sup>[6]</sup>. They are often perceived as different or even inferior by the majority population, leading to discrimination and exclusion from educational opportunities.

In some cases, cultural or traditional practices also play a role in limiting nomads' access to education. Some nomads prioritize their children's participation in activities related to their traditional lifestyle of transhumance over formal education. This is also a major factor which contributes to a significant educational gap for nomads, making it challenging for them to receive quality education and improve their economic opportunities <sup>[7]</sup>.

Another reason why the nomadic tribes of Jammu and Kashmir struggle to receive higher education is lack of fellowships and scholarships for higher education at the state level <sup>[8]</sup>. Though fellowships for schedule tribe students are there at the national level but most of these students cannot qualify for those fellowships as competition is very high at the national level. One possible reason why they are not able to qualify for these fellowships and scholarships is the difficulty in accessing basic education in the first place. Limited access to quality basic education, makes it difficult for them to qualify for fellowships and scholarships at the national level. State government should come up with fellowships for ST students at the state level. This will help addressing the issues of underrepresentation of nomadic Gujjar and Bakarwal communities in higher education.

## Conclusion

Overall, addressing the factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of Gujjar and Bakarwal communities in higher education will require a multifaceted approach. The paper concludes that nomadic tribes in Jammu and Kashmir face significant barriers to accessing and affording higher education. Policies and programs should be designed to address the unique needs of nomadic tribes to improve their participation in higher education. These policies and programs should include providing scholarships and financial assistance, improving infrastructure in nomadic areas, and increasing awareness about higher education opportunities.

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