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School Readiness among Tribal Children in South Kashmir: A Study of Socio-Cultural Factors

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Abstract:

The present study explored the school readiness of tribal children in Kashmir in major three areas such as cognitive development, language and early literacy, and social and emotional development. It also explored how factors such as educational background of parents, seasonal migration, involvement of mothers in learning, of children and differences between the home language (Gojri) and the languages used for classroom instruction (Kashmiri and Urdu) influence school readiness. A descriptive survey method was used to conduct this study. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 200 tribal children who are aged five to six years, their parents, and 40 primary school teachers in the Anantnag and Shopian districts of Jammu and Kashmir. The tool used for data collection were standardized school readiness assessments and structured schedules for collecting information about parents and their socio-cultural backgrounds. The findings showed that children from settled tribal families had higher levels of school readiness than children from families that migrated seasonally particularly in language development and early numeracy. It is also observed that there is significant difference in school readiness in relation to educational levels of parents and the language of classroom instruction. These findings necessitate the need to support children in learning through their mother tongue, introduce learning materials that connect Gojri with the languages used at school, and adapt academic schedules as per needs of migrating families. Vital involvement of parents and communities in early learning phases may also help children develop the skills and confidence that needs to commence formal schooling effectively.

Keywords: School readiness, tribal communities, tribal education, socio-cultural factors, early childhood education.

Introduction

School readiness is an important part of early childhood development because it helps children adjust to school life and take part in learning activities with confidence. It includes many skills

such as thinking and problem-solving, language development, reading and writing, basic numeracy, social interaction, and the ability to understand and manage emotions. Children who develop these skills are generally better to participate in classroom activities, communicate with teachers and classmates, and respond to new learning experiences. However, children do not develop these abilities in the same way or under the same conditions. Their readiness for school is influenced by the support they receive at home, educational background of their parents, the language they use, their cultural experiences, and the learning opportunities available in their communities. Hence school readiness should not be understood only in terms of a individual abilities of children. It is also important to consider the social, cultural, economic, and linguistic circumstances in which the child grows and learns.

The tribal populations in Jammu and Kashmir have distinctive cultural traditions and livelihood practices. Many families in these communities depend on pastoralism and move seasonally with their livestock that necessitates to search suitable grazing grounds. They travel to high-altitude pastures, commonly known as *dhoks* and *margs* during summer and return to lower-altitude areas during winter. This seasonal movement is known as transhumance as that is an important part of their traditional way of life. Gojri is widely spoken among these communities and serves as an important means of communication within families and the wider community. Early experiences of children and their learning shape their language, traditions, family relationships, and close connection with their natural surroundings. Seasonal migration and the geographical isolation of some settlements make it difficult for families to ensure to access educational institutions and provide children with regular learning opportunities. These circumstances make the early educational experiences of children from tribal communities different from those of children living in more settled communities.

The transition to Anganwadi centres and primary schools is an important stage in the lives of Gujjar and Bakarwal children. They begin this journey with the language, cultural practices, social experiences, and knowledge they have acquired within their families and communities. However it is difficult to them that to adjust when classroom instruction are in a language different from their home language. Differences between home and school languages can affect ability of children to understand instructions, express their thoughts, interact with teachers, and develop early literacy skills. Seasonal migration may further interrupt their participation in preschool activities and limit their opportunities to become familiar with school routines. Issues such as limited access to books, educational materials, and parental support for formal learning may create additional difficulties. These challenges should not be interpreted as a lack of ability or interest among tribal children as rather it may be highlighted the influence of their living

conditions and educational environment on early development. Hence it is important to understand the school readiness among tribal children from Gujjar and Bakarwal by examining their cognitive, language, early literacy, social, and emotional development in relation to their family and community backgrounds. Such an understanding can help teachers, parents, and educational planners develop more inclusive early childhood education practices that may strongly consider mother tongue of children, recognise their cultural experiences, and provide appropriate support as they enter into formal schooling.

Need and Significance of the Study

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the NIPUN Bharat Mission emphasize the importance of developing foundational literacy and numeracy skills in children during their early years of schooling. However, children from nomadic and tribal communities in Jammu and Kashmir face various issues in ensuring access to quality early childhood education. Many existing studies on tribal education in the region focus mainly on school enrolment, dropout rates, and the availability of basic facilities in upper primary and secondary schools. It is given comparatively less attention to understand whether tribal children are adequately prepared to enter Grade 1 and adjust to the formal school environment.

Studying school readiness among Gujjar and Bakarwal children is important because their early learning experiences are closely connected to their family life, cultural background, language, and living conditions. Seasonal migration may interrupt their learning opportunities and limit their regular attendance at Anganwadi centres and schools. Similarly, the difference between the language spoken at home, Gojri, and the languages used in the school environment, such as Urdu or Kashmiri, may create difficulties in communication and learning. The socio-economic conditions of families may also influence access of children to learning materials, educational support, and other developmental opportunities. Understanding these factors can help identify the difficulties children experience before entering formal schooling.

The present study is significant because it seeks to understand the school readiness of Gujjar and Bakarwal children by considering their specific social, cultural, linguistic, and educational circumstances. The findings may help teachers, parents, Anganwadi workers, and educational administrators develop more suitable approaches to early childhood education. They may also support the development of learning materials that reflect home languages of children and cultural experiences, flexible schooling arrangements for families affected by seasonal migration, and early support for children who need additional assistance. In this way, the study may contribute to more inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices and help ensure that

children from nomadic and tribal communities receive a stronger foundation for their future learning.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find the overall school readiness (cognitive, language/emergent literacy, and socio-emotional domains) among tribal children in Kashmir.
2. To compare the school readiness levels between migratory (transhumant) and non-migratory (settled) tribal children.
3. To find whether significant differences exist in school readiness between male and female tribal children.
4. To find the impact of parental education levels on the school readiness of tribal children.
5. To find the influence of home linguistic environment (monolingual Gojri vs. bilingual exposure) on language of children and emergent literacy readiness.

Hypotheses of the Study

H₀₁: There is no significant difference in the mean school readiness scores between migratory and non-migratory tribal children in Kashmir.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference in the mean school readiness scores between male and female tribal children.

H₀₃: There is no significant difference in the mean school readiness scores of tribal children across varying levels of parental education.

H₀₄: There is no significant difference in emergent language and literacy scores between tribal children with monolingual Gojri home environments and those with bilingual exposure.

Review of Related Studies

Suri (2014) studied the implementation and effectiveness of mobile seasonal schools for pastoralist communities in Pir Panjal range in Jammu and Kashmir and found that these schools helped children continue their education despite seasonal migration. It also noted that their effectiveness was limited by teacher absenteeism, a shortage of teaching and learning materials, and inadequate infrastructure in high-altitude areas. Dar (2015) studied the educational facilities and school provisions available in the tribal areas of Jammu and Kashmir and found that many Gujjar families depended on pastoral work and manual labor for their livelihood. The study also revealed that lack of basic facilities, proper infrastructure, and learning resources created difficulties for children during their early years of education. Razaqi (2015) studied the socio-economic and educational conditions of Gujjars and Bakarwals in Jammu and Kashmir and found that language was a major barrier to teaching and learning of children. Learning through Urdu or

English made it difficult for them to understand lessons and participate effectively in classroom activities since many children spoke Gojri or Pahari at home.

Suri and Raina (2016) studied the educational status and school participation of tribal Bakarwal children in Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir and found that seasonal migration interrupted schooling of children which is resulted in frequent absences and difficulties in continuing their regular education. Dwivedi (2018) studied the cultural, economic, and educational conditions of the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities in Jammu and Kashmir and found that poverty, geographical isolation, and the demands of pastoral life created major challenges for education of children. These factors affected the development of basic literacy skills and made it difficult for children to continue their schooling. Rahi (2019) studied the educational status and developmental challenges of Scheduled Tribe communities in Jammu and Kashmir and found that the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities faced considerable educational difficulties. The study highlighted geographical isolation, family dependence on assistance of children with livestock rearing, and the lack of locally relevant curricula as important factors that may affect literacy and educational participation among these communities.

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive comparative survey design with mixed quantitative and qualitative components was utilized as a research design.

Population and Sample

The population of the study was Gujjar and Bakarwal children aged 5 to 6 years who reside in the south Kashmir districts of Anantnag and Shopian. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select $N = 200$ tribal children ($n = 100$ migratory, $n = 100$ settled; $n = 104$ boys, $n = 96$ girls), along with their parents and 40 primary teachers across 30 operational schools and seasonal educational clusters.

Instruments Used for Data Collection

- 1) School Readiness Assessment Scale (SRAS):** Adapted from standard Early Childhood Readiness Batteries to reflect local contextual items, measuring Cognitive Concepts (0–30), Language and Emergent Literacy (0–35), and Socio-Emotional Development (0–25), with a composite total of 0–90 (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.86$).
- 2) Socio-Cultural Household Profile Schedule:** Structured survey assessing family mobility status, parental literacy, household income, linguistic interaction, and maternal educational engagement.

Statistical Techniques

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Mean, Standard Deviation) and inferential statistics (Independent Samples t-tests and One-Way ANOVA) using SPSS Version 26.

Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1

Comparison of Overall School Readiness Scores between Migratory and Non-Migratory Tribal Children

Group	N	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	p-value
Non-Migratory (Settled)	100	58.42	8.74	8.54*	<.001
Migratory (Nomadic)	100	47.16	9.92		

*Significant at the .01 level ($df = 198$).

Table 1 shows that non-migratory tribal children obtained a higher mean school readiness score ($M = 58.42$, $SD = 8.74$) than migratory tribal children ($M = 47.16$, $SD = 9.92$). The calculated t-value of 8.54 was statistically significant at the .01 level ($p < .001$) which shows that a significant difference in school readiness between the two *migratory and non-migratory tribal children*. Therefore, the null hypothesis which states that there is no significant difference in the school readiness of migratory and non-migratory tribal children is rejected. The finding suggest that children from settled tribal families are better prepared for school than children from migratory families. This difference may be related to seasonal migration which often interrupts learning of children that limits their access to Anganwadi centres, and reduces their opportunities to participate in organised pre-school activities.

Table 2

Domain-Wise Comparison of School Readiness Scores across Mobility Status

Domain (Max Score)	Group	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	p-value
Cognitive Concepts (30)	Non-Migratory	20.14	3.48	6.21*	<.001
	Migratory	16.82	4.02		
Language & Pre-Literacy (35)	Non-Migratory	21.80	4.12	8.78*	<.001
	Migratory	16.24	4.79		
Socio-Emotional Skills (25)	Non-Migratory	16.48	2.85	3.28*	.001
	Migratory	14.10	3.22		

*Significant at the .01 level ($df = 198$).

Table 2 shows the performance of tribal children in three areas of school readiness such as language and pre-literacy, cognitive concepts, and socio-emotional skills. The results show that non-migratory children performed better than migratory children in all three areas. Non-migratory children obtained a mean score

of 21.80 (SD = 4.12), while migratory children scored 16.24 (SD = 4.79) in language and pre-literacy. The difference was statistically significant ($t = 8.78, p < .001$). Significant differences were also found in cognitive concepts ($t = 6.21, p < .001$) and socio-emotional skills ($t = 3.28, p = .001$). Hence the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant difference between migratory and non-migratory tribal children in these three areas of school readiness is rejected. The findings suggest that seasonal migration may affect early learning experiences, of children particularly their language development and pre-literacy skills. Limited access to books, reading materials, Anganwadi centres, and regular pre-school activities may contribute to these differences.

Table 3

Comparison of School Readiness Scores between Male and Female Tribal Children

Gender	N	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	p-value
Male	104	53.21	10.84	0.72	.472
Female	96	52.12	10.42		

Not significant at the .05 level ($df = 198$).

Table 3 shows that male tribal children obtained a mean school readiness score of 53.21 (SD = 10.84), while female tribal children scored 52.12 (SD = 10.42). The calculated t-value of 0.72 was not statistically significant ($p = .472$). Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant difference in the school readiness of male and female tribal children is not rejected. The finding shows that male and female tribal children have similar levels of school readiness at the age of 5–6 years. This suggests that gender does not appear to be a significant factor in school readiness among the children included in the study.

Table 4

One-Way ANOVA for Overall School Readiness Scores by Parental Education Level

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F-ratio	p-value
Between Groups	3142.18	2	1571.09	18.35*	<.001
Within Groups	16867.42	197	85.62		
Total	20009.60	199			

**Significant at the .01 level.*

Table 4 shows the difference in school readiness among tribal children based on educational background of their parents. Children whose parents were both illiterates obtained a mean score of 48.91 ($n = 118$), while those with one parent educated up to the primary level scored 55.43 ($n = 56$). Children with at least one parent educated to the middle school level or above achieved the highest mean score of 61.15 ($n = 26$). The calculated F-value of 18.35 was statistically significant ($p < .001$). Hence the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant difference in the school readiness of tribal children based on educational level their parents is

rejected. The findings shows that parental education is associated with school readiness of children. Educated parents may be better able to support learning of their children by encouraging reading, engaging them in conversations, and helping them develop basic skills at home.

Table 5

Comparison of Language & Pre-Literacy Readiness by Home Language Environment

Linguistic Profile	N	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	p-value
Monolingual Gojri	134	17.51	4.88	5.83*	<.001
Bilingual (Gojri + Urdu/Kashmiri)	66	21.68	4.31		

*Significant at the .01 level ($df = 198$).

Table 5 shows that children whose home language is both Gojri and another language such as Urdu or Kashmiri performed better in language and pre-literacy skills than children who spoke only Gojri. Children from bilingual homes obtained a mean score of 21.68 ($SD = 4.31$), while those from monolingual Gojri-speaking homes scored 17.51 ($SD = 4.88$). The calculated t-value of 5.83 was statistically significant ($p < .001$). Hence the null hypothesis which stated that there is no significant difference in language and pre-literacy readiness between children from bilingual and monolingual Gojri-speaking homes is rejected. The findings suggest that early exposure to more than one language may help children develop vocabulary and language comprehension that makes it easier for them to adjust to the language used in school. Children who speak only Gojri at home may face additional challenges when classroom instruction is delivered in Urdu or Kashmiri.

Major Findings

Seasonal migration has a considerable impact on the school readiness of tribal children. Children from settled families showed better overall school readiness than children from nomadic pastoral families. Language and pre-literacy skills were the most affected areas among children from migratory families. Frequent migration, irregular attendance at pre-school centers, and limited access to books and learning materials may contribute to these difficulties.

No significant difference was found in school readiness between tribal boys and girls at the age of five to six years. Both groups showed similar levels of school readiness.

educational background of parents was found to be closely associated with school readiness of children. Children whose parents had received formal education performed better in cognitive and socio-emotional activities.

Children who spoke only Gojri at home showed lower levels of language and pre-literacy readiness than children exposed to Gojri along with other languages. This highlights the importance of connecting mother tongue of children with the classroom instruction.

Discussion

The findings of the study show that the school readiness among Gujjar and Bakarwal children is closely connected to their family life, culture, and way of living. A clear difference was found

between children from migratory and settled families that settled children demonstrated better school readiness. This finding is similar to the observations of Tufail (2014) and Bhat (2020), who highlighted the difficulties pastoral communities face in continuing education their children during seasonal migration. When families move to high-altitude grazing areas during the summer, children may find it difficult to attend school regularly. Mobile schools may also face problems such as irregular functioning and lack of proper early childhood education facilities. As a result, children from migratory families may lack important early learning opportunities that help them prepare for formal schooling.

Language was another important factor affecting school readiness of children. Many Gujjar and Bakarwal children speak Gojri at home, while the language used for classroom instruction may be Urdu, Kashmiri, or English. Children may find it difficult to understand their teachers, learn new words, and develop early reading skills. As a result of it. The findings suggest that children who speak only Gojri at home may need additional support when they begin their schooling. This observation is consistent with the work of Singh and Singh (2018), which highlights the challenges children may experience when the language of instruction differs from their mother tongue. Using familiar words, stories, and activities from home language of children could help them understand lessons more easily and feel more comfortable in the classroom.

The study also found no significant difference in school readiness between tribal boys and girls at the age of five to six years. This suggests that both boys and girls had similar levels of readiness for formal schooling at this early stage. However, this finding does not necessarily mean that gender-related barriers are absent from their lives. As children grow older, girls may take on greater household responsibilities, care for younger siblings, and help with livestock-related activities. Such responsibilities may affect their school attendance and learning opportunities over time. Therefore, it is important to provide equal educational opportunities for both boys and girls from the beginning and ensure that family responsibilities do not prevent them from continuing their education.

Conclusion

School readiness among tribal children in Jammu and Kashmir is influenced mainly by social, economic, linguistic, and geographical challenges rather than by differences in their natural learning abilities. The Gujjar and Bakarwal communities follow a pastoral lifestyle that necessitates them to move between different places twice a year in search of suitable grazing lands for their livestock. These seasonal movements often interrupt education of children and prevent them from attending pre-school regular activities. Language is another major challenge, as many children speak Gojri or Pahari at home, while classroom teaching is generally conducted

in Urdu or English. This difference can make it difficult for children to understand lessons, communicate with teachers, and develop basic language skills. In addition, parental illiteracy, poverty, and limited educational support at home reduce opportunities of children to develop early reading, writing, numeracy, and thinking skills before entering primary school. As a result, many tribal children begin their formal education without the learning experiences and preparation that other children may have received.

These difficulties can become more serious when children do not receive proper support during their early years. Lack of suitable teaching and learning materials as per their local needs, irregular functioning of seasonal mobile schools, teacher absenteeism, and inadequate facilities in remote grazing areas further affect their learning. The children may find it increasingly difficult to keep up with classroom activities when they repeatedly miss classes and fall behind in their studies that can be greatly caused to poor academic progress and school dropout. Therefore, improving school readiness among migratory tribal children requires educational programmes that take their way of life and learning needs into account. It is essential to implement such as mobile early childhood education centers, teaching through the mother tongue of children with the school language, and accommodate seasonal migration in school calendars that could help address these challenges. Training local community members to support learning of children and providing suitable educational materials could also make a meaningful difference.

Policy and Educational Implications

The educational challenges faced by the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities in Jammu and Kashmir show that the usual system of schooling does not always meet the needs of children from migratory pastoral families. Seasonal migration, language differences, poverty, and limited access to early childhood education make it difficult for many children to develop the basic skills needed for school. Educational policies and programmes should be planned according to the living of children conditions and learning needs so as to address these issues. Greater attention should be given to flexible schooling, mother-tongue-based learning, parental involvement, and community participation in line with the objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The following measures may help improve school readiness and reduce educational difficulties among these children.

Mother-Tongue Learning Materials: Prepare learning materials in Gojri and Pahari using local stories, songs, and familiar examples to help children develop language and early literacy skills.

Improving Seasonal Pre-Schooling: Strengthen mobile schools by providing early childhood education and trained local teachers who can support children during seasonal migration.

Parental and Community Involvement: Organise awareness programmes to help parents support children's learning through storytelling, counting games, songs, and everyday conversations.

Culturally Responsive Teacher Training: Train teachers to understand tribal languages, cultural practices, and pastoral lifestyles so they can create supportive and inclusive learning environments.

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