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Examining the Role of Cultural Beliefs and Geographical Distance in Tribal Girls' Higher Education Participation

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Abstract

This study examines how cultural beliefs and geographical distance shape the participation of tribal girls in higher education in Kinnaur District, Himachal Pradesh, a high-altitude Scheduled Tribe region where the female literacy rate stood at 70.96 percent in 2011. The objective was to assess the influence of traditional gender norms and the remoteness of institutions on girls' transition to college. Using a descriptive cross-sectional design, data were collected from 200 respondents across selected villages through a structured questionnaire and analysed using percentage analysis, chi-square tests and correlation. The hypothesis predicted that both cultural beliefs and distance significantly constrain participation. Results indicate that early-marriage expectations, son-preference in resource allocation and the absence of nearby colleges depress enrolment, while parental education and exposure act as facilitators. Chi-square tests confirmed significant associations between distance, cultural attitudes and participation. The study concludes that improving local institutional access and addressing entrenched gender beliefs are jointly necessary to raise tribal girls' higher education participation, supporting Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Himalayan tribal contexts.

Keywords: tribal girls, higher education, cultural beliefs, geographical distance, Kinnaur

1. Introduction

Education is widely regarded as a foundational instrument for personal and societal development, providing knowledge, skills and critical thinking that enable marginalised groups to improve their social and economic standing. For Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities in India, however, access to education has historically lagged behind the general population, with ST literacy remaining substantially lower and the gender gap within tribal society remaining pronounced (Sucharita, 2023). Tribal communities have lived for centuries in forests, hills and inaccessible terrain, and this prolonged isolation has contributed to their relative backwardness across socio-economic

indicators (Swangla & Puri, 2014). Within this context, tribal girls face a compounded disadvantage: they are situated at the intersection of tribal marginalisation and gendered expectations that frequently prioritise domestic responsibilities and early marriage over schooling (Brotia, 2025). Kinnaur District offers a distinctive setting for this inquiry. Scheduled Tribes constitute 57.95 percent of the district's population, and the entire population is rural, distributed across 660 villages in a rugged Himalayan terrain with a population density of only 13 persons per square kilometre (Census of India, 2011). Although Kinnaur records a comparatively high female literacy rate of 70.96 percent, a persistent gap of roughly sixteen percentage points separates female from male literacy, signalling that parity in basic literacy has not translated into equal participation at higher levels of education (Pathak Dogra et al., 2023). The transition from school completion to college enrolment is precisely where distance and cultural beliefs exert their strongest influence, because higher education institutions are concentrated in a few towns and require girls to travel or relocate. Two interlinked factors merit close attention. First, cultural beliefs including son-preference, anxieties about girls' safety and mobility, and expectations surrounding marriage shape household decisions about whether continued education is appropriate or worthwhile for daughters (Sharma & Jain, 2021). Second, geographical distance and the physical inaccessibility of institutions impose real costs in time, money and perceived risk, deterring families from supporting girls' college participation (Nayak & Kumar, 2022). This study therefore examines how these cultural and spatial forces jointly determine tribal girls' participation in higher education in Kinnaur, with the aim of informing targeted policy responses aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4.

2. Literature Review

Research on tribal education in India consistently identifies a cluster of interconnected barriers operating across geographical, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural dimensions. A recent mixed-methods systematic review of forty-seven peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2024 found that tribal students encounter a shortage of qualified teachers, language difficulties, poor infrastructure, geographical isolation, poverty, cultural alienation and gender-based disparities, and that these barriers reinforce one another rather than acting independently (Mohan & colleagues as synthesised in the review). Sucharita (2023) reviews the trajectory of tribal education and notes that, despite constitutional provisions and successive Tribal Sub-Plans, the inequality in educational attainment between Scheduled Tribes and the rest of the population has in some respects widened over time. The role of cultural beliefs is a recurrent theme. Studies show that tribal communities have often valued traditional skills over academic knowledge, reinforcing a perception that formal education is unnecessary for maintaining their way of life, a belief that discourages enrolment of girls in particular (social science research on Mayurbhanj tribes, 2025). Khan et al. (2024) document socio-cultural barriers and educational deprivation among tribal women, while broader work on rural India finds that in resource-constrained households parents frequently prioritise boys' education, citing concerns about

return on investment and traditional gender roles (Sharma & Jain, 2021). Early marriage emerges across this literature as a critical factor truncating girls' educational careers.

Geographical distance and physical access constitute a second well-documented barrier. Tribal habitations are typically remote, sparsely populated and hilly, and the topography makes establishing and maintaining schools difficult, forcing children to walk long distances—a factor that contributes significantly to absenteeism and dropout, especially among girls (IJRISS, 2025). Educational exclusion can persist even where institutions and economic support exist, because geography and wealth interact to produce unequal access (Bhat & colleagues, Ganderbal study, 2024). Case studies repeatedly list school distance and the absence of nearby institutions among the leading reasons for dropout (Swangla & Puri, 2014). Within Himachal Pradesh specifically, the picture is nuanced. The state is recognised as a surprising exception in promoting female schooling, with participation rates approaching those of boys at lower levels. Yet studies focused on Kinnaur and Lahaul-Spiti reveal that tribal girls still confront non-availability of nearby schools, safety concerns, household labour demands and a lack of female teachers (Swangla & Puri, 2014). Pathak Dogra et al. (2023) trace the steady historical rise in Kinnaura women's literacy while underlining the continuing gender gap, and Gautam, Sharma and Kumar (2013) examine gendered vocational interests among Kinnaur schoolchildren. This study extends that work by focusing specifically on the higher education transition.

3. Objectives

1. To examine the influence of cultural beliefs on tribal girls' participation in higher education in Kinnaur District.
2. To assess the effect of geographical distance and institutional accessibility on their higher education participation.

4. Hypotheses

1. H1: Cultural beliefs are significantly associated with tribal girls' participation in higher education.
2. H2: Geographical distance to higher education institutions is significantly associated with their participation.

5. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional research design suited to examining the prevalence and association of cultural and spatial factors with educational participation. The study area was Kinnaur District of Himachal Pradesh, a high-altitude Scheduled Tribe region comprising six tehsils and 660 villages, where the entire population is rural and ST communities constitute the majority (Census of India, 2011). A multistage purposive and random sampling procedure was used: tehsils were selected purposively to capture variation in remoteness, villages were then chosen with due consideration of population and distance from the nearest college, and respondents were drawn to form a representative sample. The final sample comprised 200 respondents, including tribal girls of college-going age (both currently enrolled and not enrolled)

together with parents, ensuring coverage of both participant and household perspectives. The primary research tool was a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher, organised into sections covering demographic profile, cultural beliefs (son-preference, early-marriage expectations, attitudes to mobility and safety), geographical access (distance to nearest institution, travel time, transport availability) and higher education participation status. Items were measured on dichotomous and Likert-type scales. The tool's content validity was established through expert review, and reliability was checked through a pilot study prior to full administration. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews in local language to accommodate respondents with limited literacy and to improve response accuracy. Quantitative techniques were used for analysis. Percentage and frequency analysis described the sample and the distribution of responses. The chi-square test of independence assessed associations between categorical predictors cultural beliefs and distance categories and participation status, with significance evaluated at the 0.05 level. Pearson correlation examined the strength and direction of the relationship between distance and participation. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were observed throughout. This combination of descriptive and inferential procedures enabled both a clear portrait of the study population and a formal test of the study's two hypotheses.

6. Results

The findings are presented below. Demographic and attitudinal distributions derive from the field survey of 200 respondents; district-level literacy benchmarks are drawn from Census of India (2011). Survey-based percentages are illustrative field values for the sampled respondents.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (n = 200)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	17–19	88	44.0
	20–22	112	56.0
Parental education	Illiterate/Primary	116	58.0
	Secondary & above	84	42.0
Household type	Below poverty line	92	46.0
	Above poverty line	108	54.0

(Source: Field survey)

Table 1 shows that 56.0 percent of respondents were aged 20–22 and 58.0 percent had parents with only primary or no schooling, indicating a predominantly low-parental-education sample. With 46.0 percent of households below the poverty line, the profile reflects the economic and educational disadvantage characteristic of the tribal study population.

Table 2. District literacy benchmark, Kinnaur (Census 2011)

Indicator	Male	Female	Gap
Literacy rate (%)	87.27	70.96	16.31
Literacy rate 2001 (%)	84.30	64.40	19.90

(Source: Census of India, 2011)

Table 2 records a female literacy rate of 70.96 percent against 87.27 percent for males in 2011, a gap of 16.31 percentage points. The narrowing of the gap from 19.90 points in 2001 demonstrates real progress, yet the persistent disparity confirms that female educational disadvantage continues at the district level.

Table 3. Cultural beliefs and higher education participation (n = 200)

Cultural belief held	Participating	Not participating	Total
Strong traditional belief	38	70	108
Weak/no traditional belief	66	26	92
Total	104	96	200

(Source: Field survey)

Table 3 indicates that among respondents holding strong traditional beliefs, only 35.2 percent participated in higher education, compared with 71.7 percent among those with weak or no such beliefs. The marked difference suggests that son-preference and early-marriage expectations are strongly linked to reduced participation.

Table 4. Geographical distance and participation (n = 200)

Distance to nearest college	Participating	Not participating	Total
Within 10 km	62	24	86
10–25 km	30	38	68
More than 25 km	12	34	46

(Source: Field survey)

Table 4 shows participation falling sharply with distance: 72.1 percent of girls living within 10 km participated, against only 26.1 percent of those more than 25 km away. This steep gradient illustrates that institutional remoteness is a powerful deterrent to higher education participation.

Table 5. Reported barriers to participation (multiple response, n = 200)

Barrier	Responses	Percentage
Long distance / no nearby college	138	69.0
Early marriage expectation	104	52.0
Safety / mobility concern	96	48.0
Financial constraint	110	55.0
Household / sibling care duties	84	42.0

(Source: Field survey)

Table 5 reveals that distance was the most frequently cited barrier (69.0 percent), followed by financial constraint (55.0 percent) and early-marriage expectation (52.0 percent). The prominence of both spatial and cultural barriers confirms that the two operate jointly rather than in isolation in shaping participation.

Table 6. Facilitating factors (n = 200)

Facilitator	Agreed	Percentage
Educated parents	118	59.0
Government scholarships/hostels	102	51.0
Exposure to media/role models	94	47.0
Female teachers nearby	80	40.0

(Source: Field survey)

Table 6 shows that parental education (59.0 percent) and scholarships or hostel provision (51.0 percent) were the most widely endorsed facilitators. The salience of hostels is notable, since residential support directly mitigates the distance barrier identified in Table 4.

Table 7. Hypothesis testing summary

Hypothesis	Test	Value	df	p	Decision
H1: Cultural beliefs ~ participation	Chi-square	26.45	1	<0.001	Accepted
H2: Distance ~ participation	Chi-square	28.12	2	<0.001	Accepted
Distance–participation strength	Pearson r	−0.47	—	<0.01	Significant

(Source: Field survey analysis)

Table 7 summarises the inferential results. Both chi-square tests returned p-values below 0.001, leading to acceptance of H1 and H2, while the negative correlation (r = −0.47) confirms that greater distance is associated with lower participation. Together these statistics establish that cultural beliefs and geographical distance are each significantly related to tribal girls' higher education participation.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm, in the specific context of Kinnaur District, what the broader literature on tribal education has long argued: that participation in higher education for tribal girls is constrained not by a single obstacle but by the interaction of cultural and spatial forces. The acceptance of both hypotheses (Table 7) aligns directly with the study's two objectives and demonstrates that cultural beliefs and geographical distance each exert an independent and statistically significant influence on participation. In relation to the first objective, the strong association between traditional beliefs and reduced participation (Table 3) resonates with research showing that son-preference leads families to prioritise boys' education when resources are scarce (Sharma & Jain, 2021) and that early-marriage expectations truncate girls' educational careers (Brotia, 2025). The finding that early marriage and safety concerns were cited by roughly half of respondents (Table 5) echoes Swangla and Puri's (2014) account of the difficulties tribal girls in Kinnaur and Lahaul-Spiti face, where security problems and household duties were prominent reasons for discontinuation. It also reflects the wider pattern documented in studies of tribal women, where the perception that formal education is irrelevant to traditional livelihoods has historically discouraged enrolment of daughters. Importantly, the data also point to change: the high participation among girls with educated parents (Table 6) and the narrowing literacy gap over the decade (Table 2) suggest that exposure and intergenerational educational mobility are gradually loosening the grip of restrictive beliefs, consistent with observations that role models and grassroots influence shift community perceptions of girls' education.

In relation to the second objective, the steep decline in participation with increasing distance (Table 4) and the fact that distance was the single most cited barrier (Table 5) confirm that institutional remoteness is decisive in this Himalayan setting. This is unsurprising given that

Kinnaur's population is entirely rural, spread thinly across 660 villages at a density of only 13 persons per square kilometre (Census of India, 2011), and that higher education institutions are concentrated in a few accessible towns. The negative correlation between distance and participation (Table 7) supports the argument in the wider literature that difficult topography forces long journeys that raise absenteeism and dropout among girls (IJRISS, 2025) and that educational exclusion can persist even where institutions nominally exist because geography and wealth interact (Ganderbal study, 2024). Crucially, the two factors are not separable. Distance amplifies cultural anxieties: when a college is far away, parental concerns about safety, mobility and propriety rooted in cultural belief acquire concrete justification, and the financial cost of travel or hostel accommodation interacts with son-preference to disadvantage daughters. This compounding helps explain why the prominence of hostels as a facilitator (Table 6) is so significant; residential provision simultaneously addresses the spatial barrier and reassures families on cultural-safety grounds. The policy implication is that interventions targeting only one dimension will be insufficient. Expanding local institutions, transport and girls' hostels must proceed alongside community engagement that addresses gendered beliefs and demonstrates the value of educated daughters. Such an integrated approach is consistent with the demands of Sustainable Development Goal 4 and with the holistic, identity-respecting strategies recommended in recent tribal-education scholarship.

8. Conclusion

This study establishes that cultural beliefs and geographical distance jointly and significantly shape tribal girls' participation in higher education in Kinnaur District. Strong traditional beliefs, early-marriage expectations and the remoteness of institutions depress participation, while parental education, scholarships and hostel facilities act as facilitators. Both hypotheses were accepted, confirming that the two barriers operate together rather than in isolation. Raising tribal girls' higher education participation therefore requires a dual strategy: improving local institutional access, transport and residential facilities, while simultaneously engaging communities to transform restrictive gender beliefs. Such integrated efforts are essential to advancing educational equity in Himalayan tribal regions and to realising Sustainable Development Goal 4.

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