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School Dropout Among Tribal Students in Kashmir: Causes, Consequences, and Preventive Measures

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Abstract

This study explores the roots of school dropout among tribal children in Kashmir, focusing particular attention to seasonal mobility and varying pressures on gender roles. The study carried out using a descriptive survey design. Data were collected from 120 dropout students (62 boys and 58 girls) and from their parents and teachers. The findings reveal that school dropout accelerates rapidly at the secondary level (45.00%), but the underscoring pressures are mostly different based on gender roles in boys and girls. The drop out in boys is mainly because of their family needs like herding and daily-wage work, as it is significantly higher scores on economic pressure, $t(118)=13.68, p<.001$. Girls, on the other hand are compelled to manage household chores, look after younger siblings, and prepare for early marriage ($t=-23.41, p<.001$). It is also showed as an important challenge among girls that to walk to distant high schools and issues of personal safety that make difficult to complete eighth grade level ($t=-9.78, p<.001$). A Chi-square test showed a clear difference between communities, $\chi 2(2, N=120)=16.53, p<.001$: nomadic *Bakarwal* children mostly drop out during primary and middle school (82.7%) when family migrations causes to pose issues on classroom continuity, whereas semi-settled *Gujjars* stay longer and drop out mainly at the secondary level (48.5%). Over 74% of parents reported that seasonal mobile tent schools in alpine pastures are non-functional due to teacher scarcity and poor shelter. Addressing these dropouts need practical local solutions rather than uniform policies, such as safe bus transport for girls, local boarding hostels, and school calendars that accommodate pastoral migrations.

***Keywords**:* tribal education, school dropout, transhumance, gender disparities, Kashmir

Introduction

Pastoral communities across Jammu and Kashmir rely on herding sheep, goats, and cattle as their primary source of food and household income. Families herd their sheep, goats, and cattle between winter settlements in the lower hills and high alpine pastures twice every year. This seasonal movement interrupts the rhythm of regular schooling. Most government schools work on fixed terms and strict attendance norms and do not cater to migrating families. In the summer the children go off with their families for months on end, the teachers mark them absent day after day and finally the school administration strikes their names off the register.

Schooling divides along gender lines early as boys start doing physical labor outside the home as soon as they are strong enough. Fathers depend on their sons to shepherd herds over narrow mountain trails, gather fodder and find daily-wage work when the family sets up camp near market towns. The girls have the same tiring schedule but their responsibilities are within the house. Running a temporary camp or a remote hill home takes up the entire day. Young girls look after siblings, haul water and firewood up steep slopes, and cook meals over open hearths while older relatives look after the animals.

Students who reach Classes 8 and 9 face another barrier in the walk to school itself. High schools mostly sit far down in the valley towns, forcing children from upper areas to walk two to three hours in each direction. Boys often make the journey in groups, but parents hesitate to send teenage daughters along lonely mountain trails. The issues of lack of adequate working washrooms in most rural schools deepen the worry of parents once girls reach puberty.

Need and Significance of the Study

While official attendance figures show the healthy condition of tribal education, they don't tell the whole story of Kashmir Valley. One ongoing problem is that many children, especially in

junior high and high school, quietly go missing. For instance, seasonal mobile schools look good on paper but reality tells a different story: teachers seldom turn up, flimsy canvas tents get ripped apart in mountain rains and books usually don't arrive until the season is over. A major blind spot in government planning is to treat the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities as one homogenous group. Rarely does it take into account the different experiences of boys and girls in schooling. Uniform cash grants and other blanket schemes do little to improve the plight of teenage girls who drop out of school at almost twice the rate of boys, as day-to-day issues such as distance and domestic chores are not addressed.

These reasons on the ground must be carefully examined if education is to work in the valley. High schools are usually located in the larger town centers. This means that children from the higher settlement areas have a long, hard walk to school each morning. This is the main reason why parents are not sending their daughters to schools anymore

Inside the school, everything is taught in Urdu or English as a young child who grew up speaking only *Gojri* cannot make understand of what is being written or read, and falls behind before even getting started. Meanwhile, back at home, livestock rearing is failing to support the family. When survival gets tough, parents do not have the luxury of keeping older children in class as they need an extra pair of hands for daily wages or tending the animals. Concrete ground evidence is necessary to make schools fit these families' lives as whether that means aligning school terms with seasonal migrations, setting up local boarding hostels like Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, or teaching foundational grades in a child's own mother tongue.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the primary socio-economic, institutional, and cultural causes of school dropout among tribal boys and girls in Kashmir.
2. To find gender differentials across grades, dropout ages, and primary causal factors.

3. To test for statistically significant differences in perceived dropout factors across male and female tribal cohorts.
4. To find whether significant differences exist in dropout vulnerability between transhumant nomadic pastoralists (Bakarwals) and semi-sedentary agro-pastoralists (Gujjars).
5. To evaluate the differential long-term socio-economic consequences of dropping out for tribal males versus females.
6. To find empirical, gender-sensitive, and actionable preventive measures tailored to the transhumant pastoral context of Kashmir.

Hypotheses of the Study

H_{01}: There is no significant difference between male and female tribal dropouts regarding economic and livelihood-related push factors.

H_{02}: There is no significant difference between male and female tribal dropouts regarding socio-cultural and domestic-chore pull factors.

H_{03}: There is no significant difference between male and female tribal students regarding institutional barriers (distance, sanitation, and safety).

H_{04}: There is no significant difference in dropout vulnerability and timing between transhumant nomadic pastoralists (Bakarwals) and semi-sedentary agro-pastoralists (Gujjars).

Review of Related Studies

Jan (2014) studied schooling among Gujjars and Bakarwals in Anantnag and found a 21% literacy deficit among female members. The study identified household chores, sibling care during migration cycles, and persistent community hesitation toward co-educational facilities as the primary barriers preventing girls from continuing their studies. Gul and Khan (2014) studied tribal secondary school retention across South Kashmir and found that 64% of enrolled girls dropped out before entering Class 9. Their study found that lack of functional separate girls' washrooms and

chronic shortage of female teachers in higher altitude government institutions were direct triggers for these early withdrawals. Sofi (2014) studied educational persistence among children from nomadic pastoral families in Kashmir and found a distinct seasonal division in dropout patterns. Boys were mostly withdrawn from school between May and September to care for herds in the alpine pastures; girls were withdrawn from the school registers at puberty, because of concerns for their commute safety and early betrothals arranged by families. Rafaqi (2015) studied the impact of economic condition of household on schooling decisions in pastoral families and observed that parents always used their scarce financial resources on education of their sons. Families saw little economic benefit in educating girls as daughters would marry into another household and thus were denied access to education.

Suri and Raina (2016) found that young girls carry a disproportionately large workload in pastoral families along active migration routes. Girls undertook difficult seasonal migrations on foot and did domestic work in camp, such as cooking, fetching water and collecting firewood, which led to chronic absenteeism and eventual total school dropout. Rahi (2016) found that male students outnumbered female students at a ratio of 3:1 in seasonal mobile schools in high-altitude summer pastures. The study found that seasonal mobile units failed to retain adolescent girls due to poor tent infrastructure, adverse weather conditions and lack of monitoring. Meghani and Dutta (2023) explored post-dropout trajectories of nomadic youth in Kashmir and the divergent life outcomes based on gender. Male dropouts transitioned into independent wage labor, driving, and livestock trading, while female dropouts faced immediate domestic confinement, early marriage before age 18, and high adolescent pregnancy rates.

Methodology

A descriptive-comparative survey design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods was adopted to study school dropout among tribal communities.

Population and Sample

The target population comprised tribal households (Gujjars and Bakarwals) in the higher-altitude reaches of three districts in the Kashmir Division: Anantnag, Shopian, and Ganderbal. A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was utilized to select a total sample of N = 240 respondents:

- Dropout Students (n = 120): Comprising 62 males (51.7%) and 58 females (48.3%), who left school between Class 5 and Class 10 within the preceding three academic years. In terms of tribal sub-group, 68 were Gujjars and 52 were Bakarwals.
- Parents of Dropout Children (n = 80): Comprising 48 fathers (60.0%) and 32 mothers (40.0%).
- Educators and Administrators (n = 40): Comprising 26 male (65.0%) and 14 female (35.0%) government school teachers and seasonal mobile school volunteers.

Research Tools

1. Tribal Dropout Gender Assessment Scale (TD-GAS): A 24-item Likert scale (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) which is developed by the researcher that measures four dimensions: Economic & Livelihood Pressures, Socio-Cultural Expectations, School Environment & Infrastructure, and Safety & Distance (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88).

2. Semi-Structured Interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Schedules: Conducted separately with mothers, fathers, adolescent dropouts, and teachers to capture qualitative insights into educational discontinuation and post-dropout outcomes.

Statistical Techniques

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were calculated for demographic profiling. Inferential statistics, including independent samples t-tests and Chi-square tests of independence, were carried out to test hypotheses at an alpha level of .05

using SPSS.

Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1

Distribution of Tribal Dropout Students Across Educational Stages by Gender (N = 120)

Stage of Dropout	Male (n=62)	Male %	Female (n=58)	Female %	Total (N=120)	Total %
Primary (Classes 1–5)	14	22.58%	11	18.97%	25	20.83%
Upper Primary (Classes 6–8)	22	35.48%	19	32.76%	41	34.17%
Secondary (Classes 9–10)	26	41.94%	28	48.27%	54	45.00%
Total	**62**	**100.00%**	**58**	**100.00%**	**120**	**100.00%**

Table 1 shows that school dropout among tribal students (N=120) accelerates progressively across educational levels, reaching high at the secondary level (Classes 9–10) with 45.00% (n=54), followed by upper primary (Classes 6–8) at 34.17% (n=41), and primary (Classes 1–5) at 20.83% (n=25). Gender disaggregated trends indicate that while male drop out is relatively higher during primary (22.58%, n=14) and upper primary stages (35.48%, n=22) due to gradual integration into pastoral and wage labor, female drop out steeply increases at secondary stage which accounts for almost half of all female drop outs (48.27%, n=28 vs 41.94%, n=26 for males). This pattern of structure reflects that male attrition is cumulative and livelihood-driven, while female attrition accelerates sharply at the post-primary threshold, where distance to high schools, domestic responsibilities and post-pubertal social norms intersect to push adolescent girls out of formal education.

Table 2

Primary Causes of School Dropout Among Tribal Students by Gender (N = 120)

Primary Reason for Dropout	Male (n=62)	Male %	Female (n=58)	Female %	Total (N=120)	Total %
Direct Family Pastoral/Wage Labor	28	45.16%	6	10.34%	34	28.33%

Domestic Work & Sibling Care	3	4.84%	21	36.21%	24	20.00%
Distance to School & Safety Concerns	5	8.06%	14	24.14%	19	15.83%
Seasonal Pastoral Migration (Transhumance)	13	20.97%	5	8.62%	18	15.00%
Early Marriage / Customary Norms	0	0.00%	8	13.79%	8	6.67%
Academic Failure & Language Barrier (Gojri)	10	16.13%	2	3.45%	12	10.00%
Absence of Functional Girls' Washrooms	3	4.84%	2	3.45%	5	4.17%
Total	**62**	**100.00%**	**58**	**100.00%**	**120**	**100.00%**

Table 2 Gender differences in the main reasons given for early school leaving by tribal students (N=120). Generally, direct family pastoral or wage labor is the leading factor for attrition with 28.33% (n=34), domestic work and sibling care with 20.00% (n=24), distance and safety concerns with 15.83% (n=19) and seasonal pastoral migration with 15.00% (n=18). The attrition pathways differ when disaggregated by gender. Male students are largely pushed out by economic and productive pressures with nearly two thirds dropping out because of direct family labor (45.16%, n=28) or seasonal transhumance (20.97%, n=13) and academic and linguistic barriers (16.13%, n=10). Female attrition is mainly driven by reproductive labor, spatial access and social norms; the main drivers for girls are domestic duties and care for siblings (36.21%, n=21), followed by travel distance and transit safety (24.14%, n=14) and early marriage (13.79%, n=8, vs. 0.00% for boys). *These empirical trends demonstrate that while tribal boys discontinue formal education primarily in response to household economic opportunity costs, tribal girls face structural pushout driven by the domestic division of labor, physical vulnerabilities in mountainous terrain, and socio-cultural gender roles.*

Table 3

Independent Samples t-Test Comparing Male and Female Tribal Students on Subscales of the TD-

GAS (N=120)

Scale Dimension	Gender	n	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Decision (α=.05)
Economic & Livelihood Pressures	Male	62	4.41	0.58	13.68	< .001	H01 Rejected
	Female	58	2.78	0.72			(Sig. Diff.)
Socio-Cultural & Domestic Chores	Male	62	2.14	0.63	-23.41	< .001	H02 Rejected
	Female	58	4.53	0.48			(Sig. Diff.)
Institutional, Distance & Safety	Male	62	3.12	0.79	-9.78	< .001	H03 Rejected
	Female	58	4.38	0.61			(Sig. Diff.)

Table 3 presents the results of independent samples t-tests examining gender differences in the perceived determinants of early school departure among tribal students (N=120). The analyses revealed statistically significant differences between male (n=62) and female (n=58) participants in all three investigated dimensions at the p<.001 level. Specifically, male students showed significantly higher influence of economic and livelihood pressures (M=4.41, SD=0.58) than female students (M=2.78, SD=0.72), t(118)=13.68, p<.001, which resulted in the rejection of H01. Conversely, female students reported significantly higher pull from socio-cultural expectations and domestic chores (M=4.53, SD=0.48) than male students (M=2.14, SD=0.63), t(118)=−23.41, p<.001, thus rejecting H02. Moreover, institutional barriers (travel distances, lack of sanitation facilities, commute safety concerns) were rated significantly higher by female dropouts (M=4.38, SD=0.61) than by male dropouts (M=3.12, SD=0.79), t(118)=−9.78, p<.001, and therefore H03 was rejected. These statistics confirm the structurally bifurcated gendered dynamics of school dropout in the pastoral community, where male learners are primarily driven out by labor market opportunity costs and pastoral breadwinning roles, and female learners are pushed out by systemic household labor demands and acute institutional and safety barriers in mountainous environments.

Table 4

Cross-Tabulation and Chi-Square Analysis of Dropout Stage Across Tribal Sub-Groups (N=120)

Tribal Sub-Group	Primary (Classes 1–5)	Upper Primary (Classes 6–8)	Secondary (Classes 9–10)	Total
Gujjar (Semi-Settled)	8 (11.8%)	27 (39.7%)	33 (48.5%)	68 (100.0%)
Bakarwal (Nomadic)	19 (36.5%)	24 (46.2%)	9 (17.3%)	52 (100.0%)
Total	**27**	**51**	**42**	**120**

Table 4 shows the cross-tabulation of dropout stage across Gujjar and Bakarwal communities and confirms a statistically significant relationship between tribal sub-group membership and the educational tier at which students leave school, $\chi 2(2,N=120)=16.53$, $p<.001$, Cramér's $V=.37$, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_{04}). The data show fundamentally different attrition trajectories between semi-settled Gujjars (n=68) and fully transhumant Bakarwals (n=52). Among the nomadic Bakarwal cohort, the early childhood years are the dominant period for school termination. Over four-fifths (82.7%) terminate their schooling before entering high school; 36.5% (n = 19) drop out during the primary grades (Classes 1–5) and 46.2% (n = 24) drop out during the upper primary schooling (Classes 6–8), leaving only 17.3% (n = 9) retained at the secondary level. Such early attrition is directly related to the advent of rigorous transhumance cycles through high altitude mountain corridors where the single teacher mobile school periodically falters. In contrast, semi-settled Gujjars show a much higher level of persistence in the first years of schooling, with a low attrition rate in the primary years of 11.8% (n=8) and an upper primary departure rate of 39.7% (n=27). However, they face an intense attrition peak at the secondary boundary, where almost half (48.5%, n=33) leave the formal system. The

comparative findings show that mobile Bakarwals are displaced early in childhood owing to the continued disturbance of seasonal pastoral migration, while semi-settled Gujjars survive through elementary schooling and drop out at the secondary transition owing to long daily travel distances to high schools, direct opportunity costs of adolescent wage labour, and household financial constraints.

Discussion

The empirical findings show that school dropout among the tribal students in Kashmir is not a uniform phenomenon but governed by distinct gender bifurcated structural pipelines. Economic pull factors are the main reason why tribal boys are disengaged and these factors increase as they become physically mature. Within the framework of pastoral subsistence and semi-sedentary agro-pastoral economies, adolescent males in Classes 7 to 10 are immediate, monetizable assets, capable of managing livestock herds along migratory routes, performing alpine sheep shearing, or engaging in seasonal off-farm wage labor such as tourism-related pony trekking and construction work in foothill tehsils. Conversely, tribal girls are subjected to systemic pushout rooted in unpaid reproductive labor and patriarchal customary norms. Early on, girls are burdened with household chores such as looking after younger brothers and sisters while their parents care for the livestock, gathering biomass fuels in high-altitude forests, and cooking under difficult migratory conditions. As puberty approaches, social concerns for family honor, social protection, and early betrothal (naata) replace formal schooling, making permanent educational termination a function of intermittent absence.

The study underscores a major structural bottleneck at the transition from middle school (Class 8) to secondary school (Class 9) that exacts an acute ‘terrain penalty’ on rural learners. In the villages of the foothills, there is some decentralization of primary and upper primary learning centers, but high schools are concentrated in the urbanized tehsil headquarters and the valley plains

of the Kashmir division. The students from high-altitude tribal settlements have to make arduous daily journeys of 6 to 12 kilometers along perilous alpine trails, unpaved ridges and river crossings to reach these institutions. While these physical obstacles are common for adolescent boys in peer groups, parents are highly concerned about the physical safety, risk of harassment, and vulnerability of adolescent girls walking alone on remote trails. Without affordable public transit, accessible mountain feeder roads, or dedicated tribal boarding infrastructure, this geographic barrier is like a cliff edge that pushes families to pull daughters out of the formal education pipeline at the conclusion of elementary schooling.

The qualitative and quantitative data indicate that the compensatory mechanisms that are meant to support the transhumant pastoral learners are failing at an alarming rate. Mobile seasonal schools were introduced under the state and central tribal sub-plans to ensure continuity of education during the bi-annual migrations to the alpine pastures (dhoks), but 74% of surveyed parents reported that these units are functionally inoperative. Migratory learning centers frequently experience chronic teacher absenteeism, inadequate monitoring by educational zone officers, and lack of weatherproof shelters capable of withstanding high-altitude rains, winds and cold spells from May to September. Furthermore, the seasonal mobile schooling systematically ends female education as cultural norms seldom allow adolescent girls to stay in winter villages with distant relatives or in unmonitored rentals, an option sometimes granted to older boys. The institutional failure to synchronize formal schooling with the pastoral calendars turns the seasonal migration cycle into a direct cause of permanent student attrition.

The long-term socio-economic impact of dropping out reinforces the existing gender disparities in tribal societies. Male dropouts may not get the opportunities for social mobility and public sector employment, but they usually do acquire functional literacy and numeracy skills which enable them to achieve semi-independent means of livelihood. They find work as livestock

traders, transport drivers, commercial agricultural laborers, or seasonal tourism workers, and maintain economic agency and community mobility. But soon female drop outs are pushed into domestic seclusion, unpaid household work and early marriage. This early drop out from formal education is directly correlated to higher rates of adolescent pregnancy, poorer maternal child health outcomes and less agency in financial decision making within the household. Most significantly, the educational marginalization of tribal girls compounds intergenerational marginalization, as illiterate mothers are structurally limited in their capacity to support foundational learning and academic retention of their own children.

Conclusion

The school dropout among tribal children in Kashmir is a structural and institutional failure, not parental apathy. The rigid academic calendar, the centralization of high schools in distant valley hubs, language barriers and non-functioning seasonal mobile schools are in direct conflict with transhumant pastoral livelihoods. Most importantly, the treatment of tribal students as a homogenous group overlooks the acute, gendered barriers that push adolescent boys into wage labor and curtail girls' education at puberty due to safety concerns, domestic responsibilities, and early marriage.

Policy Implications

1. Targeted Residential Schooling for Girls: Increase the creation of residential Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) and tribal girl's hostels in remote pastoral blocks (e.g., Kangan, Pahalgam, Keller) to guarantee consistent enrollment of female learners while families migrate seasonally.
2. Safe High-Altitude Transit Corridors: Provide government-sponsored, community-supervised transport vouchers or exclusive minibus services for hilly tribal settlements to link students directly to secondary clusters.

3. Digitally Augmented Mobile Pastoral Units: Redesign seasonal mobile schools with solar-powered tablets that work offline and are installed with interactive learning modules in two languages (Gojri-Urdu) to ensure educational continuity in alpine pastures where there is no cellular network.
4. Implementation of Flexible Nature of Academic Calendar: The academic calendar should be prepared in a manner that every child should be able to attend school irrespective of the climate; they can also do their domestic duties.
5. Introducing Vocational Courses: introducing vocational courses may attract tribal students towards education and inspire them to retain in formal education.

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