



Towards Inclusive Progress: A Comprehensive Inquiry into the Socioeconomic Status and Empowerment of Tribal Women in Kathua, Jammu and Kashmir

Dr. Priyanka Kumari^{1*}, Madhu Bala²

^{1*}Assistant Professor Department of English (Humanities and Liberal Arts, SoLAM) DIT University Dehradun, Uttarakhand

Email: k.priyankaenglish@gmail.com

²Research Scholar Department of Sociology HNB Garhwal University-A Central University Srinagar (Uttarakhand) Email: mb1216761@gmail.com

Citation: Dr. Priyanka Kumari, et al. (2024) Towards Inclusive Progress: A Comprehensive Inquiry Into The Socioeconomic Status And Empowerment Of Tribal Women In Kathua, Jammu And Kashmir *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1), 4343-4349 DOI: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.8012

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Kathua District, located in the Jammu and Kashmir region, is home to significant populations of Gujjar and Bakarwal communities. These tribal groups, traditionally nomadic, have been facing increasing socio-economic challenges due to changing political dynamics, land encroachment, and socio-cultural shifts. Tribal women within these communities are particularly vulnerable, grappling with layered forms of marginalization that stem from their gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Hence, this research critically examines the multifaceted challenges faced by Gujjar and Bakarwal women in the Kathua District of Jammu and Kashmir, with a focus on their socio-economic marginalization and political exclusion. Employing a multidisciplinary approach, the study explores the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and tribal identity, scrutinizing how these factors collectively shape the empowerment trajectories of these women within patriarchal and state structures. The research methodology is anchored in both primary and secondary data, with a sample size of 100 respondents across two blocks—Kathua and Hiranagar—chosen through probability sampling. Five villages from each block were surveyed, with 10 households selected per village. A mixed-methods approach was employed, incorporating qualitative insights from structured interviews alongside quantitative analysis. This study goes beyond the descriptive to critically engage with existing empowerment initiatives, revealing the systemic gaps in policy implementation and their implications for tribal women's agency. The research offers a nuanced critique of current development frameworks, advocating for context-specific, culturally sensitive interventions that align with the lived realities of Gujjar and Bakarwal women. It provides actionable insights for policymakers, aiming to foster more inclusive and transformative pathways toward their empowerment in both socio-political and economic spheres.

Keywords: Gujjar, Intersectionality, Women, Bakarwal, Caste, Tribe, Socioeconomic, and Empowerment

Introduction:

The term “Tribe” typically refers to a social group consisting of people who share common ancestry, language, culture, and customs. Tribes are often organized around kinship ties and may inhabit a specific geographic area or region. They can range in size from small, nomadic bands to larger, settled communities. According to the Oxford Dictionary “tribe is a group of people in primitive or barbarous stages of development acknowledging the authority of a chief and usually regarding themselves as having a common ancestor”. Various interpretations of the term “tribe” have been given by several sociologists over time. The definition given by D.N. Mujumdar (1961), the tribe is “a collection of families or common groups bearing a common name, the members of which occupy the same territory, speak the same language and observe certain taboos regarding marriage, profession/occupation and have developed a well-assured system of reciprocity and mutuality of obligations”. Additionally, the tribal population in Jammu and Kashmir forms a substantial 11.9% of its total

inhabitants (census of India). Historically, the socio-economic standing of the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities has diverged significantly from the broader Kashmiri society. These tribal groups predominantly inhabit remote and rugged terrains of Jammu and Kashmir, residing in dispersed settlements. Consequently, they have remained largely excluded from mainstream development initiatives, grappling with a dearth of essential amenities such as healthcare, clean drinking water, and educational opportunities. This has perpetuated dire socio-economic circumstances within these communities (Abdullah, 2014).

Nestled within the breathtaking/incredible landscape of Jammu and Kashmir are the vibrant/effervescent and resilient tribal communities, each with its diverse, unique cultural tapestry and traditions. From the rugged landscape of the Himalayas to the abundant valleys of the Pir Panjal range, the women of vibrant tribal communities embody the soul of their tribal societies, navigating through the intricacies of their environment with elegance and fortitude. In Jammu and Kashmir, there is a diverse mosaic of tribal communities, including the Gujjar, Bakarwal, and more. Women in the fabric of Gujjar and Bakarwal communities, play multifaceted roles that are crucial to socio-economic development and also form the backbone of their societies. Women are not only the caretakers of familial relationships; they are the custodians of centuries-old cultural traditions. Furthermore, these women are actively participating in livelihood activities, whether it's pastoralism, agriculture, or handicrafts. These gendered roles and discrimination among Gujjar and Bakarwal women in the Kathua region present multifaceted challenges deeply entrenched within the socio-cultural fabric of these communities. Traditional gender roles assign women primarily domestic responsibilities, including household chores and childcare, while men are often considered the primary breadwinners. This division of labour perpetuates inequalities, limiting women's access to education, economic opportunities, and decision-making roles within the household and community. Discrimination against women is also evident in practices such as early marriage, limited mobility, and restrictions on their participation in public spheres. Despite their significant contributions to household and community welfare, Gujjar and Bakarwal women often face social stigma, marginalization, and unequal treatment based on their gender. Tribal empowerment hinges on a myriad of intertwined factors, including geographical location, socioeconomic status, cultural traditions, and age demographics. Despite incremental progress, the journey toward empowerment for tribal women remains embryonic. This reality fuels ongoing debates on women's empowerment in India, with no definitive solutions on the horizon. Efforts must be redoubled, targeting the root causes of gender-based violence and inequality. Recognizing women's empowerment as a linchpin of development strategies is imperative, particularly given that women, especially in impoverished communities, bear the disproportionate burden of poverty. Within many impoverished Indian families, tribal women endure arduous physical labour, endure inadequate nutrition, face limited access to essential services like healthcare and education, receive unequal wages, and shoulder the primary responsibilities of childcare and household upkeep. Despite these monumental contributions, their roles are often overlooked, and they are excluded from household decision-making processes. Advancing women's empowerment demands a holistic approach that addresses structural inequalities, challenges cultural norms, and amplifies the voices and agency of tribal women within their communities and beyond.

Study Area:

Kathua is one of the districts located in the Jammu division (Jammu and Kashmir), nestled between the foothills of the Shivalik range and the plains of Punjab. It is bordered by Jammu district in the south and Punjab state in the southwest. This region is home to several tribal communities, among which the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities are prominent. These tribal groups have a distinct cultural identity and lifestyle that is deeply rooted in their traditional practices and beliefs.

Review of literature:

Socio-Economic Conditions of Gujjar and Bakerwal Tribes in Kashmir

Azhar Ud Din's (2015) exploration of the socio-economic conditions of the Gujjar and Bakerwal tribes in Kashmir provides a foundational understanding of these marginalized groups' struggles for social and economic upliftment. However, the study calls for a more detailed analysis of the systemic obstacles that maintain these communities' peripheral status. The tribal status of Gujjar and Bakerwal communities places them at a socio-political disadvantage, despite policies aimed at affirmative action. The effectiveness of these policies, in practice, remains limited by the lack of infrastructure, educational access, and economic resources in the areas inhabited by these tribes. Furthermore, the migratory lifestyle of the Bakerwals as pastoralists adds an additional layer of complexity to their socio-economic integration.

Research needs to extend into how globalization, climate change, and shifts in local economies affect these nomadic communities. For instance, increased industrialization and the militarization of Kashmir have drastically limited their traditional grazing lands, which has a direct impact on their livelihoods. Nanda and Sharma's (2018) observations about the unique cultural practices of Gujjar and Bakerwal tribes, including their distinctive communication modes and culinary traditions, further highlight the necessity of culturally sensitive development programs that take these differences into account rather than imposing one-size-fits-all approaches.

Gender Dynamics within Tribal Societies in India

The position of women in tribal societies, as explored by Aparna Mitra (2008) and Veena Bhasin (2007), reveals a pervasive pattern of gender marginalization, which is worsened by intersecting factors of caste and tribal identity. Mitra's study on the educational disparities for tribal women highlights one of the major hindrances to gender equality: the limited access to formal education in tribal areas. Despite constitutional protections and various schemes aimed at improving education for scheduled tribes, the literacy rates and access to quality education among tribal women remain disproportionately low compared to other groups.

Further exploration of the barriers specific to tribal women's education should consider factors such as geographical isolation, socio-cultural norms discouraging female education, and the impact of early marriage, all of which impede educational attainment. Studies have shown that while the Indian government has introduced various tribal welfare schemes, these often fail to address the unique challenges tribal women face, including the high dropout rates among tribal girls and the lack of schools in remote tribal areas.

Veena Bhasin (2007) emphasizes that the limited control women have over material and social resources contributes to their marginalization. This marginalization extends into political and economic spheres, where tribal women have little representation or decision-making power. The social roles of women within tribal societies, often confined to domestic spaces, perpetuate a cycle of economic dependence and political invisibility. While tribal women, in certain cases, hold important roles within community traditions and rituals, these roles do not necessarily translate into tangible social power or autonomy.

Moreover, Bhasin's work points to how religious, social, and political marginalization intertwines with economic disenfranchisement. Patriarchal norms in tribal communities, although perceived as less rigid than in mainstream Indian society, still uphold a power structure that limits women's participation in public life.

Towards a Deeper Intersectional Understanding

The socio-economic status of tribal communities, particularly the Gujjar and Bakarwal tribes, cannot be understood in isolation from the broader gender dynamics at play. A more advanced literature review would draw on intersectionality to analyze how gender, caste, and tribal identity collectively shape the experiences of tribal women. This intersectional approach would also consider the impact of globalization, regional conflict, and environmental degradation on these communities.

For example, tribal women's access to health care, education, and employment is severely restricted not just by socio-economic factors but also by caste-based discrimination and geographical isolation. Moreover, the pressures of conflict in regions like Kashmir exacerbate these challenges, as tribal communities are often displaced or caught in the crossfire of militarized zones.

In addition, further research could explore how tribal women themselves resist and challenge these marginalizing structures. Although marginalized, many tribal women play significant roles in grassroots movements, advocating for land rights, environmental protection, and social justice. These movements often combine gender and environmental activism, as tribal women are traditionally seen as custodians of their natural environments, a role that is now being leveraged in the fight for environmental conservation and indigenous rights.

Objectives:

- To understand the socioeconomic profile/dynamics influencing the lives of Gujjar and Bakarwal tribe women in the study area.
- To identify the challenges and barriers faced and analyze the perception of Gujjar and Bakarwal women on socio-cultural practices.
- To throw light on women's awareness regarding government initiatives and strategies aimed at/intended to empower women of Gujjar and Bakarwal in Kathua District.

Main Body

The Gujjars are one of the largest pastoral communities in the region. Historically, they have been nomadic herders, primarily involved in cattle rearing and transhumance. However, in recent years, many Gujjars have settled in semi-nomadic or sedentary lifestyles due to various socio-economic factors. Despite these changes, their cultural heritage and traditions remain significant aspects of their identity. Gujjar is rich in Cultural Heritage. They have their dialect GOJRI which is a branch of Indo-Aryan dialect and have their particular customs, nourishment propensities, living propensities and workmanship, and speciality (Farhat, 2012). The Bakarwals are another major tribal group in Kathua district. Like the Gujjars, they are traditionally nomadic herders, specializing in goat and sheep rearing. The Bakarwals are known for their seasonal migration patterns, moving with their livestock to higher pastures during the summer months and descending to lower altitudes in the winter. This lifestyle has shaped their culture, social organization, and economic activities.

Both the Gujjar and Bakarwal communities in the Kathua region confront a myriad of complex socio-economic challenges, ranging from land rights disputes to inadequate access to essential services including education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Despite several challenges, they continue to preserve their cultural heritage and maintain their traditional way of life.

Socio-economic status of respondents:**Table 1:**

Selected villages	Age group			Educational Qualification		The marital status of the respondent	
	18-28	29-38	39-above	Literate	Illiterate	Married	Unmarried
Chelak	07	02	01	07	03	06	04
Katal Brahmanan	05	03	02	07	03	07	03
Mangloor	06	03	01	09	01	08	02
Dinga amb	06	02	02	06	04	08	02
Katli	05	03	02	08	02	06	04
Janglote	04	05	01	06	04	07	03
Domar	07	01	02	05	05	06	04
Basantpur	03	06	01	08	02	08	02
Karroh	06	02	02	06	04	08	02
Katlehr	02	05	03	07	03	04	06
Total	51	32	17	69	31	68	32

The above-mentioned Table 1, clearly depicts that the respondents were selected from ten villages of Kathua district and in each village, 10 respondents were taken and all women respondents because the research is being done on females so that is the reason behind the selection of females. Based on marital status among 100 respondents, 68 are married and 32 are unmarried and by the educational distribution 69 are literate and 31 are illiterate. It was also clear from the above table that out of 100 respondents, 51 belong to the 18-28 age group, 32 belong to the 29-38 age group and 17 belong to the 39-above group.

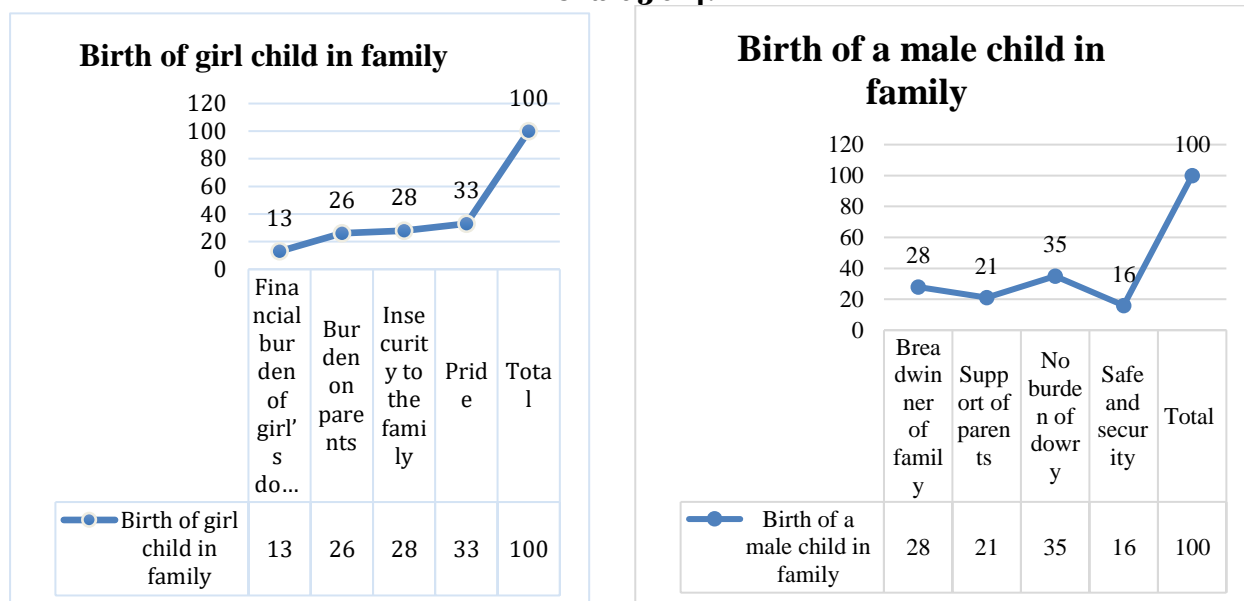
Table 2:

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Son preference attitude of Respondents in their family		
Yes	61	61
No	39	39
Daughters are paraya dhann		
Yes	75	75
No	25	25
Women are weaker than men		
Yes	49	49
No	51	51
Have you ever thought you should not have a girl?		
Yes	29	29
No	71	71
Sons provide more economic support than daughters in old age of parents		
Yes	67	67
No	33	33

Table 2 reveals that when respondents were asked if they observed or experienced the son preference attitude in the family, in response to this question, it found that majority of respondents 61 per cent of respondents had noticed the son preference attitude in their family, on the other hand, 39 percent of respondents did not experience or see a son preference attitude in their family. In response to the question of whether the daughters are "paraya dhann", it has been found that the majority of respondents, 75 percent of respondents consider daughters as paraya dhann, and the rest 25 percent of respondents did not consider daughters as "paraya dhann". Another question is whether they think women are the weaker sex in society. In response to this, it has been found that about half of the respondents replied that women are weaker than men in society. But the rest half i.e. 51 per cent of respondents, did not believe that women are more vulnerable or weaker than men in society.

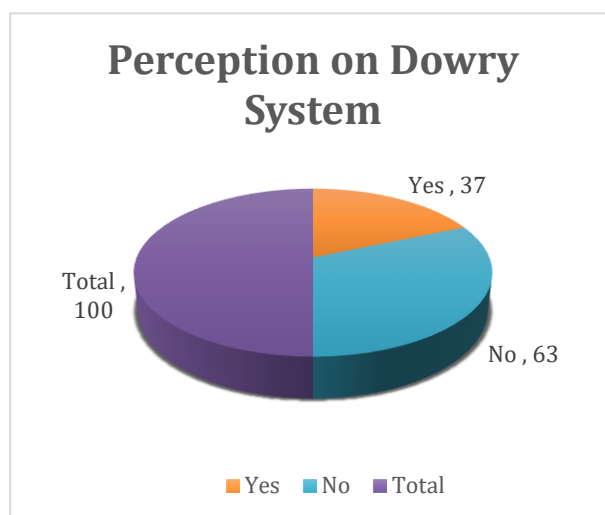
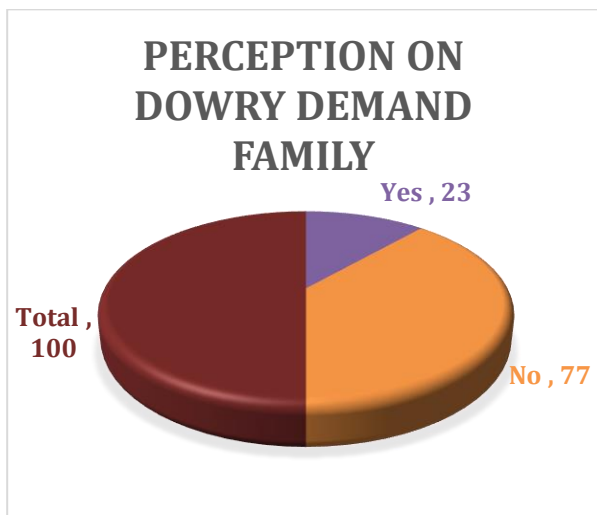
Further questions were asked to the respondents: have they ever thought they should not have a girl child? In response to this it has been found that still, 29 percent of respondents felt they should not have a baby girl and 71 percent of respondents answered that they never thought that they should not have a girl child. On the contrary more than half of respondents i.e. 67 percent believe that sons provide more economic support than daughters during their parents' old age.

Chart 3 & 4:



In the above-mentioned chart 3, it is found that 13 percent of respondents answered that the birth of a girl child is a financial burden in the family due to the girl's dowry. It also found that 26 percent of respondents responded that the birth of a girl child is a burden for parents. The study also found that about 28 percent of respondents considered the birth of a girl child as an insecurity for the family. On the other hand, most of the respondents responded that girls are the pride in the family.

In the above-mentioned chart 4, the study reveals that only 16 percent of respondents answered that the birth of a male is safe and secure for the family. About 28 percent of respondents are in favour of the birth of a male child because they consider male persons as the breadwinner of the family. The study also found that about 21 percent of respondents considered male children to be supporters of their parents during their old age. On the other hand, most respondents see the birth of boys as no burden of dowry on the parents.



Sr. No.	Perception on socio-cultural practices	Frequency	Percentage
1	Dowry is a good system		
	Yes	37	37
	No	63	63
	Total	100	100
2	Marry daughter in a family who demand Dowry		
	Yes	23	23
	No	77	77
	Total	100	100

Source: Based on Primary Data

Table 5 explains respondents' views on the dowry system. Out of a total of 100 respondents, in an opinion of about 63 percent, dowry is not a good system; 37 percent of respondents replied that dowry is a good system. Besides, the study also reveals that more than half of the respondents do not like to marry their daughter in a dowry-demanding family. But still, few of the respondents i.e. 23 percent responded that they prefer to marry their daughter in those families who demand dowry because it is safe and secure for their daughter's future life.

Table 6:

Do women have equal rights as that of men in all decision- making processes in the family?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	47	47
No	53	53
Total	100	100

It is clear from the above table that the majority 53 percent of respondents, women did not have equal rights as that of men in all decision-making processes, however, 47 percent believed that they have equal rights as men in all decision-making processes in the family.

Table 7:

Exploitation at the workplace or within the family in the form of	Frequency	Percentage
Verbal abuse	21	21
Physical abuse	7	7
Workload	32	32
Mental torture	40	40
Total	100	100

Table 7 illustrates that women are being exploited at their workplace or within the family. the findings of the study revealed that reported that they get harassed by male colleagues verbally; they face harassment by loading work and male colleagues harass them physically. The majority of respondents replied that they suffered mental torture by their male colleagues.

The findings of the study also exposed that the majority of respondents were not fully aware of the government initiatives or welfare schemes for the upliftment or empowerment of women including SGH, State Marriage Assistance Schemes, Vocational training and skill development training, Scholarship schemes for girls and social assistance schemes or any other.

Conclusion:

The investigation into the socio-economic conditions and empowerment of Gujjar and Bakarwal women in Jammu and Kashmir uncovers deep-seated structural inequities and the pervasive marginalization that these women endure. Their dual identity as both tribal and women situates them at the crossroads of multiple forms of oppression, including caste, gender, and ethnic marginalization. The Gujjar and Bakarwal women, as part of a nomadic and pastoralist community, face unique vulnerabilities exacerbated by limited access to essential services such as education, healthcare, and employment, compounded by geographical isolation and socio-political instability in the region.

Despite numerous government schemes aimed at the upliftment of tribal communities, the reality on the ground is one of insufficient implementation, where patriarchal norms and socio-cultural restrictions severely curtail women's ability to participate meaningfully in economic and social spheres. The lack of educational attainment, coupled with early marriage practices and limited political representation, reinforces their disenfranchisement, keeping them in a cycle of poverty and subordination.

However, this research also reveals the underexplored agency of Gujjar and Bakarwal women, who, despite enduring multiple layers of exclusion, exhibit resilience and resourcefulness in navigating the socio-cultural landscapes of their communities. Their roles in sustaining livelihoods through pastoral activities, as well as managing household economies, underscore the need to view empowerment beyond the conventional frameworks of political and economic participation. Empowerment for these women should be seen through the lens of enhancing their control over land rights, mobility, and access to resources, all of which are critical to their socio-economic advancement.

To move towards genuine inclusivity and empowerment, policy responses must be intersectional, addressing not only the economic but also the cultural and political dimensions of their marginalization. A shift is required from top-down approaches to policies that are informed by the lived experiences of Gujjar and Bakarwal women, recognizing their specific needs, aspirations, and the socio-cultural contexts they inhabit. Localized, culturally sensitive interventions—ranging from targeted education and vocational training to healthcare initiatives and legal reforms—are essential for fostering genuine change.

Moreover, empowerment must involve a transformation in the socio-cultural fabric of these communities, challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and fostering greater participation of women in decision-making processes. Without such shifts, structural barriers will continue to undermine the potential of these women, making development and empowerment hollow goals. Therefore, the path toward empowerment for Gujjar and Bakarwal women is not simply about inclusion in mainstream socio-economic systems but about reimagining development through the prism of cultural sensitivity, gender justice, and indigenous rights, ensuring that the voices of these women shape their future.

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