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Problems and Complexities in Rural Schools of the Himalayan Region: Challenges for Community Development

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ABSTRACT

The educational system of rural areas in India especially in the Himalayan region, is facing various problems like infrastructure, transportation, communication, and quality education. In the present paper, the focus has been given to identifying the problems and challenges faced by rural schools and factors affecting the quality of education in Himalayan region with particular reference to the Paddar sub-division in Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory. Using purposive sampling technique, data were collected from 19 schools, with 180 students as a sample. The findings of the study revealed that low educational qualifications of both parents, low socioeconomic status and low occupational status of parents were the major factors affecting the quality of education. Natural obstacles like harsh winters, heavy snowfall, a high mountainous area, and a lack of transportation also hinder the progress of education. Hence, there is a need to bring structural changes in the rural schools of Jammu & Kashmir.

Keywords: *Education; problems; challenges; rural schools, Himalayan region; Jammu & Kashmir*

INTRODUCTION

One of the significant inequalities affecting the rural poor is their unequal access to quality education (Atchoarena and Sedal, 2003). Various policies, programmes and schemes launched by the Government of India from time to time like District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), Operation Blackboard, Mid-Day-Meal, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), Right to Education Act-2009 (RTE Act-2009), Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBVs), and Samagra Shiksha to ensure equitable quality education at all levels, across the country including the rural areas (Ministry of Education, Government of India) but still the conditions of Indian rural schools have not improved adequately.

Rural education in India has mostly ignored the context of implementation and remained negligent of the external influencing factors, like social, economic, political, and socio-psychological, that mark the disadvantages of rural India and subsequently hamper rural educational practices (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2021). Due to fewer transport facilities in rural areas, most children have to walk miles to reach a government-funded school, which significantly demotivates them to attend school regularly. Improper infrastructure at rural schools, such as small classrooms, inadequate teaching equipment, lack of playgrounds and unclean toilets, is a big reason to drive away students.

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Keeping in mind the problems and complexities in the schools of rural areas and factors affecting the quality education, in the present paper, investigators have focused on the problems and complexities prevailing in government schools and factors that hampers the educational progress in the Himalayan region of Jammu and Kashmir with particular reference to the Paddar sub-division.

Paddar a rural sub-division of Kishtwar district of Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory, is one of the extremely backward sub-divisions of the Kishtwar district with extremely harsh winters, high mountains, scattered population, with more than 70 per cent of households below the poverty line. The Paddar has over 90 per cent of government schools (Zonal Education Office, Paddar). The total literacy rate of Paddar is 47.29 per cent, with 58.17 per cent male and 35.36 per cent female literacy rate. The average literacy rate of Kishtwar is 56.2 per cent, Jammu and Kashmir is 67.16 per cent, and India is 74.04 per cent (Census of India, 2011). This shows that the literacy rate of the Paddar sub-division is low relatively. Hence, the investigators had selected this area for the study. Another reason for selecting the area was that no studies on educational issues in the Paddar sub-division had been carried out.

Several studies have found that school resources such as quality infrastructure, adequate teaching-learning methods, and effective assessment techniques have a significant relationship with students' academic achievement (Hong & Zimmir, 2016, Glewwe et al., 2011; Machin et al., 2010; Knoeppel et al., 2007). Though more than two-thirds of the government schools are established in rural areas of Jammu and Kashmir but still, rural literacy rate is still lower than the national average (Annual Status of Education Report, Jammu and Kashmir, 2022). Many rural schools still need more teaching staff and basic facilities (Geelani, 2023). Due to the high mountains in rural areas, teachers prefer to refrain from performing their duties in rural areas. Most of the female teachers are attached in urban areas, and due to this, 22 per cent of schools at the primary level and 6 per cent of schools at the upper primary level in urban areas are running with surplus teachers (Department of School & Literacy, Government of India, 2023-24).

The primary focus in the present study has been given to investigate the problems and complexities faced by the students studying in the schools of rural areas and factors adversely affecting access to quality education with the following objectives.

1. To identify the problems and challenges faced in the schools of rural areas in the Himalayan region.
2. To find out the factors affecting the quality of education in the schools of rural areas of the Himalayan region.

METHODOLOGY

In the present study, the investigators have used the descriptive survey method to identify the problems and challenges faced by the students and factors affecting the quality of education in the schools of the Paddar sub-division in Kishtwar district. There were 77 educational institutions in the Paddar sub-division, with one government degree college and 76 schools (two higher secondary, eight high, 29 middle, and 47 primary schools). A total number of 4832 students were enrolled, along with 384 teachers (ZEO Office, Paddar, 2021-22). The sample was collected from 19 schools with 180 students through purposive sampling. The schools were selected in a way that at least one school from each panchayat to cover the whole sub-division.

An interview schedule, observation schedule, and checklist were used to collect the data. After the collection of required data, it was analyzed with the help of the calculation of frequencies. The calculated frequencies were converted into percentages with the help of below formula:

$$\frac{\text{Total No. of Obsevations}}{No.\,of\ Observations} \times 100$$

After the conversion of frequencies into percentages, data were represented graphically with the help of a histogram.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile

The study revealed that 48.88 per cent of the rural students were boys and 51.11 per cent were girls, 42.78 per cent students resided in joint families, and 57.22 per cent resided in nuclear families. The data also showed that majority of the students were girls in the government schools of Paddar sub-division lived in nuclear families. This means that the parents prefer to send their girl child to government schools and boy child to private schools. A majority of the fathers were farmers and labourers, whereas the majority of the mothers were homemakers and labourers. Most parents were not highly qualified and two-thirds of the mothers were illiterate. Almost all the parents were below the poverty line because more than 97 per cent of parents' monthly income was below Rs.50,000. The data indicated that the parents of the students who study in the government schools of Paddar sub-division have low educational qualifications, low socioeconomic status and low occupational status whereas studies have shown that parental educational qualifications, occupation, and family income play a significant role in the education of children (Prathak & Bhatia, 2019; Okoye, 2018).

Problems and Complexities faced in the Schools of Rural Areas in Himalayan Region

The problems and complexities faced in the schools of rural areas in Himalayan region were assessed ang given in Figure 1.

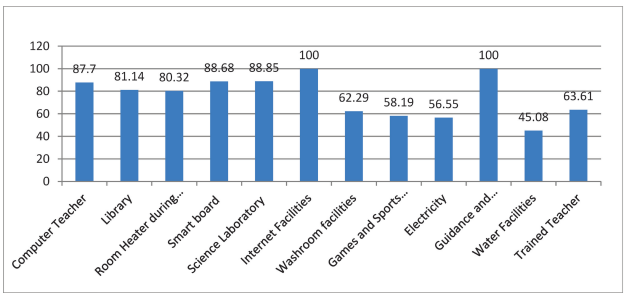

Figure: 1. Problems and Complexities faced in the Schools of Rural Areas in Himalayan Region (%)

Figure 1 shows that 87.70 per cent of schools of Paddar sub-division were functioning without computer laboratories, 81.14 per cent were functioning without library facilities, 80.32 per cent were without room heaters during harsh winter, 88.68 per cent were functioning without smart board facilities, 88.85 per cent were functioning without Integrated Science (IS) laboratory for experiments, all the schools were lack of internet facilities, 62.29 per cent schools were without proper washroom facilities, 58.19 per cent school were functioning without sports facilities, 56.55 per cent were functioning without proper electricity facilities, all the schools were not the provision of guidance and counselling cell, 45.08 per cent schools were functioning without clean water facilities, and 63.61 per cent were functioning with shortage of trained staff. The data shows that most of the schools of the Paddar sub-division were facing the problems of basic infrastructural facilities, ICT facilities and needed more trained teachers. None of the schools had internet access as well as guidance and counselling facilities. Similar problems were faced in other rural areas of

Jammu and Kashmir (Geelani, 2023; Suri, 2017), but these areas had relatively low percentages of such problems compared to Paddar. In the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, 23.6 per cent schools had no drinking water facilities, 27.3 schools were without usable toilets, 47.01 per cent schools were without usable separate toilets, 67.7 per cent schools were without books in libraries, 83.5 per cent schools with electricity available on day of visit, and only 11.8 per cent schools had functional computer facilities (Annual Status of Education Report, Jammu and Kashmir, 2022). Approximately 11.78 per cent of the teachers in the region were assigned non-teaching duties, such as elections, census, back-to-village programmes, and other miscellaneous tasks within the education department (UDISE+, 2021-22).

Further, the findings of the study revealed that the schools of the Paddar sub-division were facing problems with guidance and counselling, internet facilities, ICT facilities, computer teachers, integrated science laboratories, library facilities, teacher absenteeism, lack of supervision of higher authorities, and rote learning/traditional learning methods. Various studies also revealed that the schools in rural areas lacked infrastructure (Chowdhury, 2009; Majra & Gur, 2010; Agrawal, 2014). More than 47 per cent of education zones of Jammu and Kashmir are backward/rural zones (School Education Department, Government of Jammu and Kashmir), and the teachers of rural areas tend to be less well educated, slightly less experienced, younger, and less likely to belong to a minority group (Sumbria, 2022). Therefore, there is a clear need to focus on the educational system in rural areas because it is observed that there is a dearth of linkage between theoretical learning and practical applications, basic infrastructural facilities, trained teachers and guidance and counselling cells for students (Tankeleviciene and Damaševirius, 2009). Lastly, it was also observed that natural obstacles like harsh winters, heavy snowfall, a high mountainous area, and a lack of transportation, communication, and electricity also hampers the educational system of Paddar sub-division.

CONCLUSION

The study has indicated that the Paddar sub-division rural schools were dealing with issues related to inadequate infrastructure, including poor internet connectivity, a lack of ICT resources, inadequate electricity, a lack of trained teachers, oversight by higher authorities, a lack of room heaters for the winter, and teacher absenteeism. Other significant issues include parents with low educational qualifications, socioeconomic status, a lack of educational awareness, and students who start helping out around the house at a young age. Hence, there is a need to bring structural change in the education system by making government school education in rural areas more attractive in infrastructure and quality. There is a need to create some local pressure groups to supervise the educational system at the local level. The members of such groups should be volunteers and self-motivated without any remuneration. There is also a need to establish/facilitate local NGOs to focus on educational upliftment in rural areas. The state and central governments may also give away awards regarding the performance of schools, students, teachers, and even parents to improve their accountability and awareness. Proper digital follow-up should be maintained by higher authorities with strict rules and regulations so that it can be improved in rural areas.

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