
Women and Higher Education: From the Perspective of Darjeeling Hilly Region

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the status, challenges, and opportunities of women in higher education in the Darjeeling hill region of West Bengal. Despite significant policy initiatives and expansion in India's higher education sector, women in geographically remote and socio-economically constrained hill regions continue to face systemic barriers. The study adopts a conceptual and analytical approach, drawing upon existing literature, policy documents, and regional context to explore the intersection of gender, geography, and access to higher education. Key challenges identified include socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, infrastructural deficits, and geographical isolation. The paper also highlights gaps in existing research, particularly the lack of region-specific and gender-focused studies in hill areas. It concludes by emphasizing the need for targeted policy interventions, improved infrastructure, and community engagement to enhance women's participation in higher education in such regions.

Introduction

Education is the process of learning and gaining knowledge and helps people to understand the world, develop skills, and grow as individuals. Education starts from a young age and continues throughout life. It is important because it helps us to make better decisions, to improve our lives, and build a better society. Higher education is widely recognized as a significant contribution to societies, with numerous beneficial direct and indirect advantages documented for individuals as well as the larger community and



economy (Marshall et al.,2024).The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is an ambitious endeavour to solve long-standing difficulties and improve India's higher education scene.Education helps women to become more knowledgeable about the world outside of their immediate surroundings and helps them obtain prestige, confidence, and a positive self-image. Education directly affects women's empowerment by raising their awareness about their independence, rights, responsibilities, and possibilities.

Despite numerous reforms on women's higher education and establishment of various vocational and academic institutions women are still lagging behind in various fields. Women's right to education are avoided due to several issues that range from social discrimination, gender biasness, financial issues and harmful traditional practices. Pursuing education is merely a dream for majority of female. The gender discrimination holds the women back. Therefore, achieving gender equality and women's empowerment are essential to each of the 17 sustainable goals. The Sustainable Development Goals are related to education in general and gender and higher education in particular.Apart from these mentioned issues, the other aforementioned challenges of higher education in India are: The demand supply gap, low level of teaching quality, uneven growth and access to opportunity, more concentrated on theories rather than practical knowledge, lack of involvement in and control of educational matters by professors, abroad settlement after education, security and confidentiality, quota system etc (Attri et al., 2019).

Context: Darjeeling Hill Region

Darjeeling, a mountainous area situated in the northern part of West Bengal, is renowned as an educational powerhouse. Darjeeling is, in fact, an extensive district. The popular hill town serves as the nucleus of the area. The district encompasses the town of Darjeeling, the Kurseong subdivision, Mirik, and the terai region, among other regions. Typically, 'Darjeeling' refers to the hill town of Darjeeling (Sherpa and Rymbai,2020). Lama (2008) states in "The Story of Darjeeling" that the old Tibetan monastery located in the Observatory Hills of Darjeeling town provides explanations based on historical documents. Its name comes from Rinzing Dorji Legden La, which the Tibetans once referred to as "Dorji-Ling," which translates to "the place where four Dorji live." "The Bengal District Gazetteer" (1947) states that the Darjeeling District is shaped like an uneven triangle with a total size of almost 1,200 square miles, located between 26°31' and 27°13' North Latitude and 87°59' and 88°53' East Longitude (Dash, 1947).

Frequent landslides, poor road connectivity, and unpredictable weather conditions significantly hinder mobility. Educational institutions are concentrated in urban pockets, making access difficult for students from remote areas especially women



Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded by multiple theoretical perspectives:

Feminist Theory, which highlights systemic gender inequalities embedded in social, cultural, and institutional structures.

Capability Approach, which indicates expanding individuals' freedoms and opportunities to achieve valued outcomes

Social Exclusion Theory, which elucidates how marginalized groups are systematically, denied access to resources and opportunities.

Together, these frameworks help in understanding how gender, geography, and socio-economic conditions intersect to shape women's educational experiences in the Darjeeling hills.

Why study on this Particular area is required?

In India's patriarchal society, particularly in the economically disadvantaged hills since Independence, families prioritized the education of males above females due to their limited finances. Upon completing their schooling, females are mentally conditioned to either engage in domestic roles or pursue marriage, whereas males are perceived as providers, sometimes enlisting in the military or seeking opportunities abroad. In the current setting, the improved education system and the right to education have provided both genders with the opportunity to receive obligatory education. In the remote hills regions of Darjeeling, where tea cultivation is prevalent, women are seen as a vital labour force for the tea plucking industry, and their education is curtailed at a particular level. They choose to allocate their savings to a longstanding traditional family business instead of investing in the university education of their daughter. They exhibit considerable reluctance to allow their female child to venture outside the hilly region due to various factors, including security concerns, climatic circumstances, language barriers, health challenges, financial constraints, and a complicated lifestyle. The Darjeeling hill region features challenging topography characterized by frequent landslides, flowing river streams, and poor road conditions. Students, particularly women, often encounter significant challenges in attaining higher education.

Higher educational institutions are predominantly located in urban regions. Inadequate transport infrastructure and the deteriorating state of connecting roadways from rural to urban regions adversely impact both genders, with women more affected by socio-economic conditions. In the Darjeeling hills,



numerous government-aided institutes exist, alongside a single entirely government-operated institution. Insufficient hostel accommodations for female students, costly private hostels with inadequate water supply, substandard infrastructure, unpredictable weather patterns, recurrent institutional closures due to heavy rainfall, landslides, and political issues impede female students' access to higher education.

Review of Literature

Existing literature on women and higher education highlights persistent gender disparities influenced by socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. Studies have shown that while access to education has improved globally, women in rural and geographically isolated regions continue to face multiple disadvantages.

Research in hilly regions such as Meghalaya, Manipur, and Uttarakhand reveals common challenges, including poor infrastructure, financial constraints, and limited institutional access. Studies focusing on Darjeeling are limited, with only a few addressing women's higher education in this specific context.

Furthermore, literature indicates that policies aimed at promoting gender equity often fail to address region-specific challenges, particularly in remote areas. This underscores the need for localized and context-sensitive research.

Gap Spotting

Till date only one research has been undertaken regarding the issues faced by women in the Darjeeling hills (Sherpa and Rymbai, 2020). The study meticulously emphasised the primary challenges and conditions of women in the hill region of Darjeeling District. Nonetheless, the restricted study facilitated further and more rigorous research about all aspects of women in higher education, including their representation across various sectors, the current status of women in higher education, and the associated advantages and disadvantages.

Numerous researches have been undertaken on various hilly regions throughout different states and nations, yielding diverse results. Myrthong, F. L. (2021) Rural Students Transition into Higher Education in Meghalaya, Baklo (2019) studied problem of higher education in the hill, Hoakip (2015) studied development of higher education in the hill areas of Manipur, Chanu and Heina (2013) worked in women's higher education in the valley area of Manipur.



Upon reviewing the diverse literature, it is evident that a significant research gap exists. Insufficient research is being undertaken in the remote regions of numerous places. Moreover, insufficient study has focused on women in higher education from the relevant areas, particularly rural or hilly regions. It is imperative to perform a study on the subject of women in higher education in the Darjeeling hilly region.

There is a notable void in the hill region when studies are absent. Since all the fundamental facilities, geography, regional context, and education in the hill region differ from those in the plain region of the State, this area calls particularly great attention. Most of the studies carried out have cleared the path for additional inquiry in any field of interest. Not only in the hill regions, but also in the rural areas of the other states. Like the studies by Queshi et al., (2021) and Chanu and Heina (2013), various obstacles were underlined towards the pursuit of women in higher education. Thus, it is important to look at more general features of research on the underdeveloped hill areas. One ought to observe the higher education of women.

The Government of West Bengal has introduced various measures to enhance women's education, which is noteworthy; yet, significant problems exist regarding the accessibility of these efforts to both the intended beneficiaries and the governing authorities. Due to the lack of research in this critical domain, a significant gap has emerged. The carrying out of many policies and projects requires the involvement of women in these domains. No research has been conducted in the Darjeeling hills about women's participation in such initiatives, resulting in a substantial gap for further exploration in this unexplored domain. Moreover, it is imperative to examine all pertinent aspects in the pursuit for higher education for women in the hill region of Darjeeling.

The researcher's comprehensive review of the existing literature revealed a substantial gap in research regarding the specific features of women in higher education, specifically "in the Darjeeling Hills. The significance of a dedicated study to examine the intricate dynamics of women in higher education is underscored by the absence of research.

Future Research Direction

In-depth Case Studies: A rigorous study undertaking women enrolled and employed in all sectors of higher education in the hill region of Darjeeling.

Comparative Studies: Compare women's higher education in the Darjeeling hill region in comparison to the plain region to find practices and places for improvement impacted by numerous factors.



Community Engagement: Investigate how community involvement might enhance women's education in hill regions by resolving issues and improving the educational atmosphere.

Conclusion

The Higher Education system in India is witnessing significant transformations and reforms. The globalization of economic activities and development in science and technology accelerate the emergence of new types of higher education institutions. India is today one of the fastest developing countries of the world with the annual growth rate going above 9%. Still a large section of the population remains illiterate and a large number of children's do not get even primary education. Opportunities are available but how to get benefits from these opportunities and how to make them accessible to others is the matter of concern. Women constitute the paramount unit of a nation's social, cultural, and economic advancement. Higher education is essential for women as it enhances societal and economic conditions; education is a fundamental necessity of life that enriches existence. Women are not merely creators; they may also serve as pioneers, leaders, and agents of decision and change. This theoretical study has enabled the researcher to investigate an uncharted domain related to women, which will benefit both women and other key stakeholders in addressing an issue and effecting significant change for the advantage of the specific locale, ultimately benefiting the state and nation as a whole.

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