



Access to Higher Education among the Pahari Community in Jammu and Kashmir

Mohd Tariq

Research Scholar, Department of Educational Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, 110025

Email: mohdtariq2445@gmail.com

Dr. Md. Musa Ali

Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia

Email: mali12@jmi.ac.in

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ABSTRACT

Access to higher education in Jammu and Kashmir varies widely across regions, and the hilly border districts, where the Pahari community is concentrated, are among the least served. Against this backdrop, and the community's recognition as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) in 2024, this paper examines two inter-related yet distinct issues: (i) the factors that shape access to higher education among the Pahari, and (ii) the extent to which ST status and the schemes attached to it can be expected to improve that access. On an analysis of Census 2011 estimates, the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), college listings and scheme guidelines, it is shown that the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of the Union Territory fell from 24.8 in 2021–22 to 21.5 in 2023–24, while the national ratio rose from 28.4 to 30.0. The ST GER, at 17.0, is lower still, even though the Gujjars and Bakarwals have held the status since 1991. Rajouri and Poonch together have only 13 government degree colleges, most of them offering conventional BA and BSc programmes. It is also shown that distance, limited choice of courses, cost, language and gender norms, rather than the absence of reservation alone, keep students out. As the available data are not disaggregated for the Pahari and predate their

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inclusion, the effect of recognition cannot yet be established. However, recognition widens entitlements only on paper; whether it becomes access depends on local institutions and on whether benefits reach the most deprived families within each community.

1. Introduction

Education has always been regarded as an important tool for the progress of individuals and of society as a whole, and higher education occupies a special place within it. It has been called the “strategic heart” of education, since it trains the teachers, doctors, engineers and officers on whom every other level of schooling depends (Mamdani, 2008, p. 2). Economists treat it as an investment that raises earnings (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964), and it can also be seen as widening the range of lives a person can choose to lead (Sen, 1999).

India has expanded its higher education system rapidly. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), the share of 18 to 23-year-olds enrolled, reached 30.0 in 2023–24, and the National Education Policy 2020 aims at 50 per cent by 2035. However, it is widely known that participation continues to vary by region, gender and social group, and a nearby college is of little use to a student who cannot reach it, afford it or stay on.

The Pir Panjal hills illustrate this clearly. Rajouri and Poonch are home to several communities who share the same roads and often the same few colleges. The Gujjars and Bakarwals, Scheduled Tribes since 1991, are the best known. Alongside them live the Pahari-speaking people, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, who form the majority in these two districts and a large minority in Baramulla and Kupwara. Many of them are first-generation learners.

Until 2024 the Pahari were outside the ST list, with only a 4 per cent quota as Pahari Speaking People in place since 2020. In February 2024 Parliament added the Pahari Ethnic Group, the Paddari Tribe, the Koli and the Gadda Brahmin to the list. Earlier writing on the Pahari mostly concerns identity, language and politics, and research on tribal education has centred on Gujjars and Bakarwals. The effect of the new status on higher education has hardly been studied. In the light of these facts, and because the communities’ live side by side, the present paper examines their experience together wherever the evidence allows.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study has been undertaken with the following objectives.



1. To examine the factors that influence access to higher education among the Pahari community.
2. To review the role of government schemes in supporting that access, including schemes meant for the older tribal communities of the region.
3. To assess what the 2024 ST recognition has changed, and is likely to change, for access to higher education.
4. To suggest measures for improving access.

3. Methodology

The present study follows a descriptive design and is based entirely on secondary sources. Population figures were drawn from Census 2011 and the estimates based on it, enrolment data from the AISHE reports for 2021–22 to 2023–24, and institutional details from the Directorate of Colleges. Information on schemes and reservation was taken from official guidelines and the 2024 Act and notifications, and the discussion is supported by news reports and published research on the Pahari, Gujjar and Bakarwal communities and on tribal students elsewhere in India.

4. How Access to Higher Education Can Be Understood

Keeping in view the objectives of the study, it is necessary to understand why equally eligible students have such different chances of reaching college. Human capital theory holds that families weigh the cost of study, including fees, travel, lodging and a pair of hands lost at home, against what it is likely to earn later (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964). For families who live on farming and wage work, returns that are late and uncertain can easily lose out.

Families also hand down a feel for academic life, such as how to choose a course and deal with a college (Bourdieu, 1986). They bring networks of people who know how admissions and scholarships work (Coleman, 1988). First-generation students from hill villages usually begin with little of either.

Sen's capability approach asks what people can actually do with what is on offer (Sen, 1999). A college in Rajouri is a resource, but whether a village student can use it depends on roads, hostels, teaching, course choice and money. Social exclusion theory adds that being kept out altogether is different from being let in on poor terms, to weak institutions with weak prospects afterwards (Sen, 2000).



Background therefore decides whether a student applies at all, and local conditions decide whether enrolment turns into learning and a job. ST recognition works mainly on the first, since it adds entitlements, and much of what follows asks whether it can reach the second.

5. *Pahari Community*

The Pahari community is a semi-nomadic tribe of Jammu and Kashmir, recognized as one of the largest semi-nomadic ethnic groups in the region. In 2024, they were granted Scheduled Tribe (ST), due to their primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation and social disadvantages. They comprise an estimated 8.18% of the overall population of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Although the Pahari community is spreading throughout the UT, the majority of the Pahari community is found in the districts of Rajouri, Poonch, Baramulla, Kupwara and Anantnag. The Pahari community are also primarily nomads like Gujjars who move from plains to the upper hills with their Cattle as part of their annual seasonal migration with their livestock. The Pahari community In Jammu and Kashmir represents an ancient ethnic group tracing its origins to the Aryan race, which historically migrated to the region. This community primarily inhabits the southern upper hills of the Pir Panjal range, including areas near Nanga Parbat, Drawa, western Banihal, and Muzaffarabad. The term “Pahari” translates to “people of the hills,” referring to the inhabitants of hilly regions in Jammu and Kashmir. According to Motilal Saqi, the term “Pahari” encompasses distinct linguistic, historical, social, and political traits. It denotes a group whose mother tongue is Pahari and who reside in the Pir Panjal range, stretching from the mid-region of the Jhelum River to the Chenab River. The Pahari community is distinguished by its unique physical features, traditional attire, and rich cultural heritage, all of which contribute to preserving its identity. While most of this community speaks the Pahari language, the region also includes members of the Gujjar and Bakerwal communities. The inhabitants of areas stretching from Badel to the Karna hills share a common cultural identity despite minor linguistic variations. Many members of this community reside in villages near the Line of Control (LoC), where living conditions are exceptionally harsh. The local economy predominantly relies on agriculture, which is heavily influenced by unpredictable weather patterns and the use of rudimentary tools. Due to a lack of electricity, modern transportation, and other essential facilities, establishing businesses or enterprises in Pahari-dominated areas remains challenging. (Rehman 2015).

Table 1. Pahari population by district, Jammu and Kashmir (Census 2011 basis)

District	Total population	Pahari population	Share (%)
Rajouri	642,415	360,409	56.10



Poonch	476,835	267,194	56.03
Baramulla	1,008,039	141,157	14.00
Kupwara	870,354	103,082	11.84
Anantnag	1,078,692	84,742	7.86
Ganderbal	297,446	17,497	5.88
Bandipora	392,232	16,993	4.33
Shopian	266,215	13,427	5.04
Other 12 districts	7,234,785	13,553	0.19
All 20 districts	12,267,013	1,018,054	8.30

Source: *State Advisory Board for Development of Pahari-speaking People (2018), based on Census 2011. Shares recalculated by the author.*

In 2011 about 92 per cent of the people of Rajouri and Poonch lived in villages, and the sex ratio was low, at 860 and 893 females per thousand males (Census of India, 2011). The ST figures of that year (36.2 per cent in Rajouri, 36.9 per cent in Poonch) count mainly Gujjars and Bakarwals, since the Pahari were not yet listed. With the Pahari now on the ST list, the category covers a far larger share of the population, and future ST statistics will not be comparable with earlier ones.

6. Higher Education in Jammu and Kashmir: What the AISHE Data Show

Higher education in Jammu and Kashmir cannot be judged from the number of institutions or total enrolment alone, because where colleges are located and how easily students can reach them matter just as much. From the perusal of the AISHE data, it is evident that the GER rose nationally from 28.4 in 2021–22 to 30.0 in 2023–24, whereas in Jammu and Kashmir it fell from 24.8 to 21.5 (Ministry of Education, 2024, 2026; Kashmir Life, 2026b). The gap with India thus widened from 3.6 to 8.5 points, against the direction of the national goal set by NEP 2020. Enrolment in the Union Territory also fell by 12 per cent, from 400,423 to 352,487, while it rose across India (Mehta, 2026). This is more worrying for remote, hilly and border districts, where a nearby college does not mean students can attend it conveniently.

Table 2. Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education, Jammu and Kashmir comparison to India

Category	J&K 2021–22	India 2021–22	J&K 2023–24	India 2023–24
All students	24.8	28.4	21.5	30.0
Male	22.6	28.3	18.5	28.9



Female	27.2	28.5	24.8	31.2
Scheduled Castes	20.4	25.9	17.0	27.8
Scheduled Tribes	18.9	21.2	17.0	22.8

Source: AISHE 2021–22 and AISHE 2023–24

It is quite evident from Table 2 that the GER among social groups also shows wide disparities. In 2021–22 the GER of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Jammu and Kashmir was 20.4 and 18.9, below the all-India figures of 25.9 and 21.2. By 2023–24 both had fallen to 17.0 in the Union Territory, while the national figures had risen to 27.8 and 22.8, so the ST gap widened from 2.3 to 5.8 points (Ministry of Education, 2024; Mehta, 2026).

The low ST figure assumes importance here because several remote and hilly parts of the Union Territory have large tribal populations. Until 2024 the Scheduled Tribes of Jammu and Kashmir were mostly Gujjars and Bakarwals, who have had reservation since 1991, yet their GER in 2023–24 was nearly six points below the national ST figure. Status on paper has not closed the gap for the community that has held it longest, so it would be unwise to expect the 2024 recognition to change things quickly for the Pahari.

Women's GER in Jammu and Kashmir (24.8) is higher than men's (18.5), so the totals do not show women simply being kept out of college. Gender norms probably matter at certain points, such as distance from home or postgraduate study.

GER excludes students studying outside the Union Territory, and the 2023–24 ST figure refers to the old list, so later changes will not by themselves show what the policy did.

7. Colleges in Rajouri and Poonch: What Is Available Locally

Statewide figures show how far the Union Territory has fallen behind, but not where within it students are worst off. The Directorate of Colleges lists 145 degree colleges, 72 in the Jammu division and 73 in the Kashmir division. That looks balanced, but the hill-border districts sit in the Jammu division alongside the plains, and a balance between divisions says little about districts. Table 3 reveals how thin the provision is in Rajouri and Poonch.

Table 3. Higher education institutions in Rajouri and Poonch compared with Jammu and Kashmir

Type of institution	J&K	Rajouri	Poonch
Degree colleges (Directorate of Colleges)	145	9	4



Colleges with postgraduate courses	22	1	0
Engineering, pharmacy, MBA and MCA colleges	48	0	0

Source: Directorate of Colleges and Health and Medical Education Department, Jammu and Kashmir

Almost all of these colleges offer undergraduate courses, mostly BA and BSc, and neither district has an engineering, pharmacy, MBA or MCA college. Rajouri has Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University and a Government Medical College set up in 2016. Poonch has no university campus or professional college.

The larger institutions of the Union Territory, such as IIT Jammu, AIIMS Vijaypur and NIT Srinagar, are all elsewhere. A student from a remote Poonch village who wants a professional course must travel to Jammu, Srinagar or beyond, and the Mughal Road is shut for part of every winter. Families bear the cost of rent, food and fares as well as fees, and leaders in Rajouri and Poonch have demanded a National Law University in the Pir Panjal (Greater Kashmir, 2026).

Hostel facilities decide whether a student from a distant village can attend at all. In some districts there are hostels for Gujjar and Bakarwal boys but not for girls, and the same is likely for Pahari girls (India Development Review, 2023). A degree from a narrow, mostly general course mix may also be worth less than one from a better-equipped institution, which is the inclusion on poor terms described earlier.

8. Factors Influencing Access to Higher Education

The barriers that keep Pahari students from reaching college are of several kinds. Some lie in the colleges, some in the cost of study and the family's circumstances, and some in the land, the border and the job market. The following paragraphs describe them in turn, drawing on studies of the Pahari and of other tribal students.

8.1 Colleges and teaching on the ground

The first barrier lies in the colleges themselves. Pahari families generally see higher education as a route to a better life, but what is available locally is weak. It would be wrong to say that colleges are missing in rural areas and in the wider blocks of the hilly and border regions, since Rajouri and Poonch alone have 13 government degree colleges (Table 3). The difference lies in quality. Urban centres are far ahead in infrastructure, teaching and updated courses, whereas rural colleges, including those in the remote hilly and border blocks, lag behind on all three even though they are many in number (S. Sharma, 2014). They have weak buildings, laboratories and libraries, too few regular and qualified teachers, and few new or job-



oriented programmes. Guidance and awareness cells are weak or absent, and students get little exposure to the wider academic and professional world. The Pir Panjal is hidden inside the wider label of “Jammu”, which conceals its large gaps in colleges, health facilities and jobs (Sohail & Zunaidha, 2026). Poor teaching and a lack of learning material lower the value of a degree and the motivation to continue (Khan, 2024). Studies of Poonch also report teacher absenteeism (A. H. Shah, 2024; Suri, 2014).

8.2 The cost of studying and what families know

Even where a college is within reach, the cost of attending it can put it out of reach. Poverty is the obvious barrier, but hidden costs such as travel, lodging, books and study material matter as much (Khan, 2024). Money is the biggest barrier to equal access in India, ahead of family background (Kumar, 2019). Private institutions have added seats, but high fees keep poorer students out (Khan, 2024; The Hindu, 2024). Many families also do not know which scholarships exist (Khan, 2024).

8.3 Family background, language and gender

Money is only one part of a family’s situation. Many Pahari students are first-generation learners, with no one at home who has handled an admission form or an entrance test. It has been reported that first-generation students in India find it hardest to turn plans for college into enrolment, since they lack the guidance others have (Wadhwa, 2018). Language makes it harder still. Students whose home language is Pahari are taught in Urdu and English, and understanding suffers (Khan, 2024). The same problem is reported for tribal students in Telangana (Punnaiah, 2018).

Gender norms add to this. Early marriage, household duties and worries about safety restrict women’s participation (Khan, 2024). Girls also leave school early in the backward parts of Poonch (Suri, 2014). Yet women’s GER in the Union Territory is higher than men’s, so the barrier may be strongest in certain districts, in postgraduate study, and where continuing means living away from home.

8.4 Distance, the border and livelihoods

Where a family lives shapes access as much as what it can afford. Mountains, poor roads and long distances make physical access hard, especially from remote villages (Khan, 2024). Cross-border shelling and security restrictions have also disturbed academic routines (Khan, 2024). It has been observed in studies of Gurez and Poonch that low educational development is tied to nearness to the Line of Control, harsh weather and cross-border tension (Skinder et al., 2021; A. H. Shah, 2024).



8.5 Internet access and the job market

Some of the distance could in principle be covered online, but this brings problems of its own. Online classes after the pandemic exposed a digital gap in Rajouri and Poonch, with weak connectivity and few devices (Khan, 2024). Weak higher education in remote areas has likewise been linked to poor digital access and a gap between education and employability (B. R. Shah, 2025). Local colleges offer few job-oriented courses, and unemployed graduates weaken belief that a degree pays off (The Hindu, 2024; Khan, 2024).

8.6 What the Gujjars and Bakarwals can teach us

The older tribal communities have faced these barriers for longer, and their experience is a useful guide for the Pahari. Mobile schools were meant to follow migrating families, but many in Poonch are reported to exist only on paper (Gulzar, 2021). Three lessons carry over. Schemes reach students only when they fit the way families live. Girls are the first to drop out when distance makes schooling hard. And support that ends at school leaves the hardest step, the move into college, unaided.

9. Role of Government Schemes in Supporting Access to Higher Education

Keeping in view these barriers, government schemes constitute the main attempt to support Scheduled Tribe students in higher education. At the national level, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs runs the Post-Matric Scholarship, the National Scholarship (Top Class Education), the National Fellowship and the National Overseas Scholarship. The Post-Matric Scholarship covers recognised courses from Class 11 to postgraduate level for students whose parental income is below ₹2.5 lakh, while the National Scholarship supports study at notified premier institutions for that below ₹6 lakh. The National Fellowship offers 750 new fellowships every year for M.Phil. and Ph.D. study, and the National Overseas Scholarship supports about 20 students a year at top universities abroad (Business Standard, 2023).

In Jammu and Kashmir, the Directorate of Tribal Affairs implements the Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarships through the National Scholarship Portal. It also runs residential hostels for Gujjar and Bakarwal students (Department of Tribal Affairs, n.d.). Students of all categories from Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh can also apply for the Special Scholarship Scheme (now under PM-USP), which gives ₹1 lakh a year plus a fee ceiling for study outside the two Union Territories (Ministry of Education, 2025).

Three points follow from this. First, almost all of these schemes require a valid ST certificate, so the speed and fairness of certification now matter as much as the schemes themselves. Second, income ceilings shut out some families, although a rise in the post-matric ceiling to ₹4.5 lakh has reportedly been proposed for



2026–31 (Vision IAS, 2025). Third, reach remains uncertain, as the number of ST post-matric beneficiaries in Jammu and Kashmir fell from 10,399 in 2023–24 to 6,591 in 2024–25 and 4,548 in 2025–26 (Kashmir Life, 2026a). A scholarship is also of no use to a student who has no college within reach or has never heard of the scheme.

10. Scheduled Tribe Recognition and Its Influence on Access to Higher Education

10.1 The Constitution (Jammu and Kashmir) Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment) Act, 2024

The Act added the Pahari Ethnic Group, the Paddari Tribe, the Koli and the Gadda Brahmin to the ST list, following the 4 per cent quota for Pahari Speaking People introduced in April 2020 (SCC Online, n.d.). In March 2024 the Union Territory's Administrative Council approved a separate 10 per cent reservation for the four new groups, leaving the existing 10 per cent for the earlier tribes untouched and taking the total ST quota to 20 per cent (A. Sharma, 2024).

10.2 Disputes over the Decision and Who Benefits

The decision has been disputed. Gujjars and Bakarwals, who held the original quota, opposed sharing it. Critics argue that the Pahari as a group do not share the usual features of scheduled tribes and that some sections are comparatively well off (Kashmir Observer, 2025). The Act has been challenged in the High Court for lack of data on backwardness (Greater Kashmir, 2024). Other petitions argue that reservation now crosses the 50 per cent ceiling (ETV Bharat, 2024).

A further concern lies within the communities themselves. Well-placed families in both the Pahari and Gujjar communities are better able to learn about reservation, obtain the certificates it requires and secure its seats and scholarships, while deserving students from poor households are more likely to be left out. No data show who actually uses the quota within each community, but a larger quota alone will not correct this. Gujjars, Bakarwals and Pahari live in the same hills and face many of the same obstacles, and a contest over quota shares risks turning them into rivals.

10.3 From Rights on Paper to Actual Access

The separate 10 per cent for the four new groups is shared among them, so representation depends on certification and competition. The benefits of ST status work at three points. In admissions, students can claim reserved seats in government colleges and in professional and postgraduate courses, which matters most where seats are few. In jobs, reservation in direct recruitment to government posts is significant in a Union Territory where public employment is the main source of secure work (The Hindu, 2024), and the



prospect of a reserved post may also make a degree look worth its cost, which speaks to the doubt about returns noted in Section 8.5. In finance, a valid ST certificate opens the Post-Matric and National Scholarships, the National Fellowship, the National Overseas Scholarship and the ST hostel schemes described in Section 9. It also opens concessional education loans, such as the Adivasi Shiksha Rrinn Yojana of the National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation, which finances technical and professional courses up to ₹10 lakh per family at 6 per cent a year (National Scheduled Tribes Finance and Development Corporation, n.d.). Together these may lower the cost of study, but each depends on a valid certificate.

It is quite evident that all of this describes entitlements, not outcomes. Nothing in the available data shows yet whether more Pahari students are entering or finishing college because of the new status. Recognition adds to what students can claim, but does little for the colleges and hostels that decide whether a claim becomes a degree.

11. What Can Be Done

In the light of the above discussion, the following suggestions are offered for the region as a whole, since Pahari, Gujjar and Bakarwal students depend on the same institutions.

The first need is more colleges, including satellite campuses, in Pahari-majority areas and in the wider blocks of the hilly and border regions, such as those of Rajouri, Poonch, Kupwara and Baramulla, with a wider choice of courses. Commerce, computer and job-oriented programmes in existing colleges would ease the narrow supply seen in Table 3. Numbers alone are not enough, so rural colleges also need regular and qualified faculty, better laboratories and libraries, updated syllabi, and career guidance and awareness cells that give students exposure beyond their district.

Hostels come next, and girls need them most. They should admit students from every community of the region and keep places for girls.

Money and information must reach the right students. Scholarships should be properly implemented, income ceilings reviewed and the poorest households in each community reached first. Certificate camps in Pahari-majority blocks and awareness drives in schools and colleges, in the language spoken at home, would help families who do not know what is available.

Reservation should also reach the deprived within each community. The government may consider a law or rules, on the lines of the creamy-layer exclusion for OBCs, under which families above a defined income or



status threshold would not claim the ST quota, so that seats, posts, scholarships and loans go first to first-generation learners and poor households. The idea is legally contested. In *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* (2024) four of the seven judges observed that States should evolve a policy to exclude the creamy layer among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, whereas the Union government maintains that the concept does not apply to them. Any such measure would need the approval of Parliament or the competent legislature, reliable data on who benefits and a transparent certification process. Meanwhile, priority within the quota for first-generation learners, and published data on who uses it, would be a milder step.

Connectivity, devices, safe transport and mentoring should reach remote areas, especially for the move to postgraduate study.

Finally, better data are needed. Enrolment, retention and completion should be reported separately for the Pahari, Gujjars, Bakarwals and other ST communities from 2024–25, since without this the effect of recognition cannot be judged.

12. Conclusion

The present study has found that access to higher education for the Pahari community is limited by a mix of geographical, economic, institutional and social barriers, most of which they share with the Gujjars, Bakarwals and other communities of the region. The latest AISHE data show a Union Territory falling further behind the country, and in Rajouri and Poonch the supply of higher education is thin, with a few mostly general degree colleges, one university and one medical college, while rural colleges lag behind urban centres in infrastructure, teaching and updated courses. ST recognition, with a separate 10 per cent quota, opens new routes through reserved seats in admissions and government jobs, scholarships, fellowships and concessional education loans. It does not, by itself, put a college in a remote valley or add a professional course, and it may favour the better-off within each community unless benefits are made to reach the deprived.

The older tribal communities have had reservation for over thirty years, yet their enrolment remains well below the national level, so quota is better treated as a beginning than an answer. Fair access also needs colleges within reach, hostels and aid that reach families, working certification, attention to gender and better evidence.

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