

Educational Initiatives for Empowerment of Scheduled Tribe: A Case Study of Ladakh

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Abstract: Education serves as both a measure and a tool for development, playing a crucial role in the accumulation of human capital. The paper analyses the initiatives, and role of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council in imparting education for tribal communities in Ladakh. The study provides a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council's strategies and programs in enhancing education of tribal communities in Ladakh. It identifies strengths, weaknesses, and areas needing improvement, helping policymakers make informed decisions about future educational policies and programs. Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council has implemented major initiatives to advance educational development for tribal communities, with a focus on elementary, secondary, and higher education. This study relies on primary data collected from executive members of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) in the Leh and Kargil districts. In-depth interviews were conducted using an interview schedule to explore various issues and challenges concerning the education of Scheduled Tribe communities in Ladakh. Their comprehensive approach reflects a strong commitment to improving educational outcomes through targeted interventions and community involvement, contributing significantly to the broader goal of educational advancement in Ladakh. Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, encompassing both the Leh and Kargil district councils, has made significant strides in promoting education in Ladakh.

Keywords: Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council; Scheduled Tribe; Education

INTRODUCTION

The sparsely populated region of Ladakh (India), once a kingdom, was governed by the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir for more than a century before India gained independence in 1947. In 1979, Ladakh was divided into two districts, Leh and Kargil, and later became a part of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (Dame & Nusser, 2008). Ladakh, is distinguished by its unique geographical, cultural, and climatic conditions. Referred to as the "land of high passes" "Land of Lamas", "Moonland" etc. Ladakh, one of India's highest plateaus, lies at an altitude of 3,000 meters or more above sea level. It shares its northern and eastern borders with China and Pakistan. The Ladakh region, known for its geographic isolation, vast terrain, and challenging climate, remains landlocked for nearly half the year. Ladakh is home to a diverse array of tribes, each with its own distinct ancestry, rituals, and customs. The region comprises eight scheduled tribe groups: Boto, Balti, Brokpa, Purigpa, Changpa, Garra, Mon, and Beda. Each group speaks a unique dialect, wears different attire, and plays distinct music, yet they coexist harmoniously. In this multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural setting, languages such as Purigi, Balti, Broqskat, Shina, and Ladakhi are spoken, and the scripts used include Urdu, Persian, and the Tibetan script known as Bhoti (Khatoon & Kumar, 2021).

In early 2019, a sudden administrative restructuring led towards the establishment of a separate Ladakh Revenue Division, distinct from the Kashmir Revenue Division. This marked a significant step toward distancing Ladakh from the influence of Kashmir. Later that same year, as the entire state underwent reorganization, the long-standing Ladakhi aspiration to be governed as a separate UT of India was realized when the Parliament of India passed the necessary legislation. On August 5, 2019, Ladakh officially achieved the status of a Union Territory, marking for the first time in 185 years that it regained an independent identity, separate from the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

According to the 2011 Census, Ladakh had a population of 274,289. In Leh district, the literacy rate is 77.20%, with 86.31% for males and 63.56% for females. In the Kargil district, the literacy rate is 71.34%, with 83.15% for males and 56.30% for females. The people of Ladakh have long sought effective local governance to drive development that is both equitable and comprehensive, considering the region's unique geoclimatic and locational challenges. They believe that decentralizing power through the establishment of Hill Councils in Ladakh would enhance development efforts and meet the aspirations of the local community by fostering greater participation in decision-making processes (Beek, 1995).

The Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) Act of 1995 was established in reaction to the Ladakhi people's demand for a separate Indian Union

Territory, reflecting their distinct religious and cultural identity, which set them apart from the rest of Jammu and Kashmir. The LAHDC Act was initially enacted in 1995, re-gazetted in 1997, and amended in 2018 (Sharma, 2011). According to the Act, the council consists of twenty-six seats filled by representatives directly elected from territorial constituencies. Additionally, the government can nominate up to four members from principal religious minorities and women in the districts. The executive committee of the council includes five members: the Chief Executive Councillor (CEC) and four other councillors (Kothari et al., 2019). The formation of the Autonomous Hill Councils in Ladakh marked a significant advancement in acknowledging the region's unique identity and aspirations. This council created a framework for participatory democracy, allowing the local population to manage their development and governance while preserving their unique cultural and religious heritage. Education has been a critical area of focus for the LAHDC, considering its vital role in socio-economic development.

The Council holds executive powers within the district concerning several key areas, including the allotment, use, and occupation of land vested in it by the government under this Act. It is responsible for formulating development programs for the district, covering both district-specific schemes as notified by the government and centrally sponsored schemes. The Council takes special measures to generate employment and alleviate poverty, promotes cooperative institutions, and supervises the constitution of notified area committees. It also focuses on promoting languages and culture, managing water resources for agriculture, and overseeing desert development, public health, sanitation, hospitals, and dispensaries. Additionally, it plays a role in tourism, education, vocational training, and the construction and maintenance of roads, except highways (Sharma, 2011).

The LAHDC envisions providing accessible and inclusive education for everyone, irrespective of gender, social background, or special needs. They aim to promote high standards of education across primary, secondary, and higher secondary schooling, as well as colleges and vocational institutes. Special focus is given to the health and nutrition of nursery and kindergarten children, creating a child-friendly infrastructure and atmosphere to nurture them. This includes teaching culturally rooted and innovative subjects that emphasize the environment, history, language, culture, and heritage of the region (Leh Vision 2030, 2020). Scholarships are offered to deserving students for highly specialized or advanced educational courses outside Ladakh. Serious public debates regarding the expansion of educational opportunities for regional development captured the political attention of the LAHDC. In response, civil society members proposed a multipronged strategy to enhance the quality of education and assess the current educational landscape through preliminary investigations. In partnership with local entities such as the LAHDC, the Department of Education, the Student's Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh, and other Ladakhi non-governmental organizations, key focus areas for political intervention in education were identified (Babu, 2023).

The study provides a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness of LAHDC's strategies and programs in enhancing education of tribal communities in Ladakh. It identifies strengths, weaknesses, and areas needing improvement, assisting policymakers in making informed

decisions regarding future educational policies and programs. This leads to more targeted and effective interventions by assessing resource utilization and guiding better future allocation. The findings can act as a case study for other regions facing similar challenges, allowing successful strategies to be replicated and lessons learned to be applied elsewhere. By documenting successful initiatives, the study highlights best practices in educational development, providing a model for other autonomous councils or regions. It also promotes greater transparency and accountability by evaluating how well LAHDC has met its educational goals and adhered to its commitments.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2008) stress the significance of localized governance in attaining better educational outcomes for tribal communities. Negi and Dutta (2022) point out that government investments in education have significantly improved academic performance and expanded opportunities for Scheduled Tribes. By facilitating access to quality education, these initiatives have empowered these communities to break free from the cycle of poverty and marginalization. Mathew (1994) highlights that institutions like Autonomous Hill Development Councils play a vital role in addressing regional disparities through targeted initiatives. The LAHDC has taken significant steps to integrate Bhoti and other tribal languages into school curricula, promoting cultural preservation alongside formal education (Dorje, 2018). Additionally, scholarship programs and financial aid provided by the council have greatly enhanced accessibility to higher education for tribal youth (Jina, 2005).

According to Indus Dispatch (2022), the Hill Council Leh has initiated a digitization project to establish Solar-Powered Digi-Labs in around 27 government schools across the Leh district. This initiative aims to bridge the digital divide in areas lacking the infrastructure needed for digital learning. However, Ahmad's (2020) study indicates that while colleges in urban Ladakh are relatively well-equipped, those in rural regions face significant challenges, including insufficient classrooms, laboratories, transportation, and hostel facilities. Other barriers, such as poverty, long commutes, harsh climatic conditions, outdated syllabi, high absenteeism, and student migration, further hinder the effectiveness of these institutions. Rehman (2013) also emphasizes that teacher absenteeism and ineffective learning environments in schools discourage parents from enrolling their children in education.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To investigate the initiatives implemented by the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council to improve educational opportunities for the tribals of Ladakh.
2. To examine the future strategies planned by the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council to promote education.
3. To propose approaches to enhancing educational outcomes in Ladakh

METHODOLOGY

This study relies on primary data collected from executive members of the LAHDC in the Leh and Kargil districts. The LAHDC comprises 60 members (30 from each district), out of which 10 executive councillor were purposively selected-5 from each district. These

councillors hold key departmental portfolios and have the authority to initiate policies in their respective districts. The participants included the Hon'ble Chairmen/Chief Executive Councillors of Leh and Kargil districts, along with other influential members, particularly those overseeing departments related to education, to ensure the collection of relevant educational insights. In-depth interviews were conducted using an interview schedule to explore various issues and challenges concerning the education of Scheduled Tribe communities in Ladakh. The study was carried out during the period 2019–2020.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS OF THE STUDY

When asked about the common issues brought to representatives by the tribal communities, they mentioned that a variety of problems are reported. Most of these issues include chaotic teacher transfers, staff shortages in schools, colleges and universities, a lack of trained teachers, low student enrolment, a shortage of subject-specific teachers, insufficient infrastructure, limited awareness of the importance of education among the population, and a general lack of community engagement in educational initiatives.

Other concerns include the need for better teacher rationalization, quality education, transportation facilities for teachers and students, residential accommodations for teachers, hostel facilities for students, effective teacher training, internet facilities, room heaters for classroom in winters, libraries, drinking water facility, separate toilets for girls, efficient functioning of Village Education Committee (VECs), a high student dropout rate, and the necessity for additional computers in schools. Delays in receiving scholarships cause significant challenges for students.

Regarding the challenges faced in elementary education, most members of the LAHDC reported low enrolment in primary schools. The main reason is that many parents prefer to enrol their children to private schools rather than government schools, due to the belief that government schools lack sufficient facilities and fail to offer quality education. Additionally, they feel that government schools do not offer sufficient exposure or opportunities. Some parents even choose to send their children outside of Ladakh for better educational prospects. Three councillors highlighted that many schools in the Leh district face potential closure due to low enrolment, with most enrolled students being non-locals, primarily the children of labourers. Field surveys confirmed that several schools, especially in Leh, had only 4–5 students per school, despite having 5–6 teachers available. To address the low enrolment, many schools had formed clusters to remain operational. Additional challenges were identified, including a lack of parental interest in education, a shortage of trained teachers, inadequate training for Rehbar-e-Taleem teachers, limited access to computers and libraries, poor supervision, insufficient teaching aids, and inadequate sports equipment. Ahmed (2024) also observed in his study that many teachers at both elementary and higher secondary schools lacked formal teacher training.

They also highlighted challenges in secondary schools, including a shortage of lecturers. The survey revealed that secondary schools are particularly impacted by this shortage. In recent years, the Department of School Education has increasingly relied on academic arrangements or temporary recruitment at both primary and secondary levels, a practice that has contributed to a decline in educational quality. Additionally, schools face issues such as

insufficient laboratory equipment, limited subject options, low enrolment rates, and exam-related malpractice. Since Ladakh's transition to Union Territory status, addressing these challenges has become more complex for the UT government, as all schools in the region are now affiliated with the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). The recently announced CBSE results for classes 10 and 12 were disappointing, further compounding the government's challenges.

In higher education, they reported numerous issues, including limited subject options in colleges and universities. Ladakh has one cluster university, one deemed to be university, six-degree colleges, two ITI colleges, and two polytechnic colleges, which are insufficient for the region. The field survey revealed that the majority of the staff at the newly established university and degree colleges were on a contractual basis. Additionally, due to low enrolment, some subjects had to be discontinued. Other problems include the limited availability of academic streams, a lack of colleges, and inadequate awareness among students about admissions.

When asked about the steps being taken to address these issues, representatives assured that they are implementing all possible measures to resolve the problems. Some of the actions include streamlining the teacher transfer process, which had previously been disorganized and lacked transparency. In the past, some teachers were transferred multiple times within a year, while others were never transferred. This issue was also cross-checked during the field survey, where teachers reported that the problem with teacher transfers have now become somewhat resolved. They further stated that efforts have been implemented to solve the shortage of specialized instruction by providing teacher training and recruiting subject-specific instructors. Funds have also been designated to equip schools with laboratories. Five councillors mentioned contributing 20–30% of their Councillor Constituency Development Fund toward education. However, during the field survey, teachers reported that schools continue to face a shortage of subject-specific lecturers and insufficient funding. Additionally, they have supplied teaching aids to schools and, notably, the LAHDC has merged ICDS centres with primary schools. Efforts have been made to encourage parents to enrol their children in government schools. This includes raising awareness about the importance of education and having volunteers visit homes to personally advocate for enrolment. Parents are now getting confidence in government schools, understanding its importance and most importantly, the competition of enrolling children in private schools has changed. Additionally, improvements have been made to school infrastructure, such as constructing separate toilets, providing computers, and organizing community awareness programs. A notable initiative by the LAHDC is the rebranding of government schools as Government Council Model Schools, designed to provide high-quality facilities and sufficient staff to meet students' needs. Observations during the field survey confirmed that these Council Model Schools offer superior facilities and have well-qualified teachers available. Some councillors shared that they had organized free winter coaching for students in their respective areas. In Ladakh's cold climate, schools remain closed for nearly three months during the winter break, making these initiatives especially valuable, particularly in rural areas where coaching centres are unavailable.

To address the shortage of trained and qualified

teachers, the LAHDC recruited new teachers, provided training, and addressed issues of teacher absenteeism by implementing mandatory biometric attendance in all educational institutions. The LAHDC also signed several MOUs, including one with the Delhi Government, to facilitate teacher exposure visits and invited Delhi-based experts for teacher training. The Bakula Rinpoche educational campaign was started to tackle challenges faced by schools in especially in Leh district. Additionally, the LAHDC, particularly in Leh, began rotating Rehbar-e-Taleem (R-e-Ts) teachers based on their willingness to serve in various locations, in contrast to the previous policy requiring them to remain in one place for their entire tenure. Sports programs for students were also organized to enhance their overall experience. All members of the LAHDC acknowledge that there are numerous issues in the school education system that require prompt attention, and they are committed to doing their best to resolve these challenges.

When asked about the steps taken by the LAHDC to actively engage the community and Panchayats in improving education, most members reported organizing awareness programs on education and health, allocating funds for school improvements, and revitalizing the Village Education Committee's (VECs), which had been declining. They also regularly monitored VEC activities and held monthly meetings to address school related issues. This was further confirmed during the field survey, which revealed that VECs are working diligently to improve schools and are holding frequent meetings.

When asked about the future strategies of the LAHDC to enhance the quality of education in Ladakh, representatives expressed that they plan to increase funding for the education sector in the coming years. They also intend to strictly enforce a transparent teacher transfer policy to alleviate the challenges teachers face and students are facing problems due to uncertain transfers of teacher. The Council seeks to increase community involvement in school activities and ensures that the village education committee actively participates in all school programs. LAHDC also ensure that every school is equipped with electricity, internet access, libraries, drinking water, heating facilities during winters, separate toilets for girls, transportation facility, hostel, laboratories, sports equipment's, Staff quarters, sufficient teachers, and adequate computers. They also plan to launch a website providing detailed information about each school in Ladakh. Additional initiatives include providing free school bags to students on every Saturdays, developing sports infrastructure, installing solar power in all schools, strengthening the District Institute of Education and Training, and organizing more exposure visits for teachers to other states. They also plan to provide more winter coaching facilities to students and want to promote winter sports during winter vacation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government/LAHDC must consistently allocate sufficient funds to upgrade the education system as needed. It should also launch various initiatives to raise awareness among parents, teachers, and students about the value of education.

The LAHDC have successfully adopted a few government schools as model schools, which offer better facilities and employ trained teachers. To expand this success, the councils should adopt more government schools,

equipping them with improved facilities and human resources.

It is essential for the government to take appropriate measures to recruit subject-specific and trained teachers in a timely manner, ensuring that students do not face any educational challenges. Given the low enrolment ratio in government schools, the government should organize awareness programs and schemes to motivate parents to enrol their children in government schools.

The study highlights a lack of essential facilities in schools, colleges, and universities, including internet access, smart classrooms, transportation, hostels, libraries, laboratories, heating systems, sports equipment, and provisions for children with physical disabilities. The government must take serious measures to provide these facilities across educational institutions. Students should be provided with career counselling in collaboration with Non-Governmental Organisations.

Teacher training is a vital component of education, and the government must ensure that teachers, especially those under the R-e-T (Rehbar-e-Taleem) scheme, receive adequate training. Additionally, the government should implement new textbooks for lower-grade classes that reflect the local environment and culture, helping students grasp basic concepts more easily. Residential schools must be strengthened to ensure that tribal students, particularly those from nomadic communities, do not face any challenges.

Equip schools in tribal regions with technological resources, including computers, internet connectivity, and digital learning tools. Additionally, establish training programs to enhance both teachers' and students' proficiency in using these technologies.

Develop mentorship initiatives, support networks, and preparatory courses to assist students in their transition from secondary to higher education. Increase awareness and accessibility of scholarships for higher education.

Expand the availability of scholarships, grants, and stipends specifically for students from Scheduled Tribes. Enhance the employability of tribal students by providing vocational training and skill development programs tailored to meet current job market demands.

The study also highlights a limited range of subject and course options available in universities and colleges. To address this, the government must introduce new subjects and establish additional colleges in rural areas, reducing the need for students to cover long distances for their education. Collaborating with non-governmental organizations can further enhance educational programs and support services.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, encompassing both the Leh and Kargil district councils, has made significant strides in promoting education in Ladakh. They have addressed numerous issues, such as recruiting subject-specific teachers and implementing a fair and transparent teacher transfer policy, particularly in the Leh district. Both district councils have adopted several schools as council model schools, providing them with top-notch facilities and teachers. Admission to these schools has become highly competitive, with merit lists determining enrolment. The councils also initiated door-to-door campaigns to raise awareness among parents about the significance of education and motivate them to enrol their children in government schools.

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