



Socio-Cultural barriers to inclusive education and psychological wellbeing in tribal Kashmir

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Abstract

The present study examined how socio-cultural obstacles to inclusion affect psychological well-being in Tribal Students from Gujjar and Bakarwal Communities in Jammu-Kashmir State -- Anantnag District and Bandipora District. A Descriptive Survey Design methodology was used in this study and included a sample of 130 Tribal Students (68 Male; 62 Female), enrolled in Secondary and Senior Secondary Government Schools. Using a self-developed questionnaire called the Socio-Cultural Obstacles to Inclusive Education Questionnaire (SCBIEQ) and the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Sisodia & Choudhary, 2012), data were collected from participants. Findings indicated that a large percentage of the respondents (72.3%) identified socio-cultural obstacles to education as significant barriers to their education (e.g., language barrier; seasonal migration; parental illiteracy; gender roles/expectations; cultural disconnection with school curriculum). Furthermore, findings also indicated that tribal students who identified significant socio-cultural barriers to education had lower levels of psychological well-being ($p < 0.001$) compared to those who did not identify significant socio-cultural barriers. Gender differences existed as female tribal students identified more significant socio-cultural barriers ($M = 68.42$; $SD = 9.13$) compared to male tribal students ($M = 59.76$; $SD = 10.21$). The researchers recommended that culturally responsive teaching methods be developed and implemented to address the educational needs of tribal youth living in Kashmir; they also suggested developing and implementing mobile schooling systems to provide access to education for tribal youth and providing mental health services to support the psychological well-being of tribal youth in Kashmir.

Keywords: Socio-cultural barriers, inclusive education, psychological wellbeing, tribal students, gujjar, bakarwal, kashmir

Introduction

India's tribal communities, which make up an estimated 8.6% of the nation's total population and comprise 705 identified Scheduled Tribes, have remained the most educationally disadvantaged group in the country.

Gujjar and Bakarwal tribes represent the largest tribal groups in the state of Jammu & Kashmir and account for approximately 11.9% of the population of the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir. There are approximately 980,000 Gujjars and 110,000 Bakarwals in Jammu & Kashmir.

Despite being afforded constitutional protection through Articles 15(4), 46 and 275(1), and despite the existence of policies including the Right to Education Act (2009) and the National Education Policy (2020) [6], the literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes in Jammu & Kashmir is only 50.6%, far less than both the national tribal average of 59%, and the overall national literacy rate of 74%. Tribal women in Jammu & Kashmir also face significant challenges in accessing education; according to the 2011 census, only 25.5% of Scheduled Tribe women in Jammu & Kashmir were able to read and write, compared to 34.8% nationally.

The concept of "inclusive education," which includes educating all children in mainstream educational settings regardless of social, cultural, economic or ability-related differences, was first articulated by UNESCO through the Salamanca Statement (1994) [16]. However, for tribal children in Kashmir, inclusive education is more of a goal than a reality. Barriers to inclusion are not just practical but are deeply ingrained into the socio-cultural practices of tribal people. The obstacles include: seasonal transhumance (biannual migrations of Bakarwal and some Gujjar families with their herds between high-altitude and low-altitude

grazing areas); linguistic disadvantage (most tribal children speak Gojri as their primary language, whereas school instruction is provided in either Urdu or English); strict traditional roles that restrict girls from traveling independently; forced labor due to financial pressures; and curricula that reflect neither the knowledge systems nor the lived experiences of tribal communities – all of these contribute to the exclusionary structure.

The mental health consequences of exclusion from education are profound, although there is little research on the subject regarding Kashmiri tribal populations. While research on Kashmiri students generally indicates a high degree of psychological distress due to the effects of conflict and political instability, the specific interaction of tribal identity, socio-cultural marginalization, and psychological well-being in educational environments has been virtually ignored in academic literature. Bhat (2021) [1] determined that the location where a student lives is a factor influencing their level of psychological well-being among senior secondary students in the Kashmir Valley. Similarly, Mir and Anjum (2026) [8] discovered that male tribal undergraduate students in Kashmir report higher levels of perceived stress than do their female counterparts. Suvera (2013) [15] found that non-tribal college students exhibit greater psychological well-being than tribal college students in Gujarat.

This current study seeks to fill this research gap by exploring the degree to which socio-cultural barriers to inclusive education are experienced by tribal students in two districts of Kashmir, and how those barriers relate to psychological well-being. This study is based on the assumption that barriers to education are not simply issues of access but are fundamentally psycho-social and that

understanding the relationship between these barriers is important for developing effective interventions.

Review of Literature

Sahu *et al.* (2025) [11] examined the social, cultural, and institutional, and economic barriers to tribal education in India and found that 24% of tribal children drop out of school; they found that the reasons for this were mainly due to poverty, lack of parent involvement, stereotypes based on gender and language barriers. Jabbar *et al.* (2024) [3] explored the trend in Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in Scheduled Tribe (ST) students, and observed that although there is an increase in participation in elementary education, GER drops sharply in middle and upper-middle education.

Singh & Lone (2025) [13] in their study on Shopian district (Jammu & Kashmir) identified main barriers to tribal learners in Jammu and Kashmir: lack of adequate physical infrastructure, seasonal migration, and lack of culturally sensitive teachers and language barriers. Wani & Majid (2024) [18] discussed the education challenges of Gujjar women in Budgam district (Jammu & Kashmir). They found that conservative society norms, lack of education infrastructure and poverty restrict the educational opportunities of Gujjar women.

Rasool & Vyas (2025) [9] studied the effectiveness of tribal welfare policy for women in Jammu and Kashmir. The researchers observed that there was a great improvement in women's self-help group-based financial independence, however the challenges in terms of education and political empowerment remain.

Sucharita (2023) [14] provided a critical review of various educational intervention programs for tribal children in India. She found that the educational programs initiated by the Indian government aimed to assimilate tribal children into mainstream culture rather than integrating them into the educational system as individuals from diverse cultures, therefore, assimilating the identity of the tribe and erasing their cultural differences using a one-size-fits-all model.

Kumar & Reddy (2025) studied the barriers to inclusive education under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 [6] framework. The researchers found that the barriers to inclusive education included: lack of necessary infrastructure, lack of necessary professional development for teachers, the entrenched social biases against marginalized communities, and the digital divide.

Bhat (2021) [1] researched 519 senior secondary students in the Kashmir Valley, and found that the place where students live has a significant effect on their psychological well-being. Kalim & Prasad (2025) [5] found that when comparing the psychological well-being of 30 tribal and 30 non-tribal B.Ed. students in Ranchi, non-tribal students had significantly better psychological well-being. Verma (2025) [17] conducted research on 150 students (75 tribal and 75 non-tribal) in Jharkhand, and found that tribal students experienced significantly greater stress, insecurity and loneliness than non-tribal students, however, spirituality played a role in mitigating some of these issues.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the major socio-cultural barriers to inclusive education as perceived by tribal students in Anantnag and Bandipora districts of Kashmir.
2. To assess the level of psychological wellbeing among tribal students in the selected districts.

3. To examine the relationship between socio-cultural barriers to inclusive education and psychological wellbeing of tribal students.
4. To compare the perception of socio-cultural barriers and psychological wellbeing across gender (male vs. female) and location (rural vs. remote/migratory).

Hypotheses

H₁: There exist significant socio-cultural barriers to inclusive education among tribal students in Kashmir.

H₂: The level of psychological wellbeing among tribal students is significantly below the normative average.

H₃: There is a significant negative relationship between socio-cultural barriers and psychological wellbeing.

H₄: There are significant differences in perceived socio-cultural barriers and psychological wellbeing based on gender and location.

Methodology

1. Research Design

A descriptive survey design was adopted. This non-interventional, cross-sectional approach is appropriate for examining the prevalence and correlates of socio-cultural barriers and psychological wellbeing within a defined population at a single point in time.

2. Population and Sample

The target population comprised tribal students (Gujjar and Bakarwal communities) enrolled in secondary and higher secondary schools (Classes 9–12) in the Kashmir division of J&K. A sample of 130 tribal students was drawn from two districts:

District	Male	Female	Total
Anantnag	33	32	65
Bandipora	34	31	65
Total	67	63	130

Sampling technique: Stratified random sampling was employed. In the first stage, two districts (Anantnag and Bandipora) were purposively selected based on their high tribal population concentration. In the second stage, four schools from each district (two government, two private) were randomly selected from tribal-dominated areas. In the third stage, students were randomly selected from each school, maintaining approximate gender parity.

Inclusion criteria: (i) Belonging to Gujjar or Bakarwal Scheduled Tribe community; (ii) Enrolled in Classes 9–12; (iii) Willing to participate.

Exclusion criteria: (i) Students with diagnosed psychiatric conditions; (ii) Students absent on the day of data collection.

3. Tools Used

(a) Socio-Cultural Barriers to Inclusive Education Scale (SCBIES)

A self-developed structured questionnaire comprising 30 items across five dimensions:

Dimension 1: Language and Communication Barriers (6 items)

Dimension 2: Economic and Livelihood Barriers (6 items)

Dimension 3: Gender and Cultural Norms (6 items)

Dimension 4: Migratory Lifestyle and Access (6 items)

Dimension 5: Curricular and Institutional Disconnect (6 items)

Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Total scores range from 30–150, with higher scores indicating greater perceived barriers. Content validity was established through expert judgment (5 education and psychology faculty members). Cronbach's alpha reliability was 0.84.

(b) Psychological Wellbeing Questionnaire (PWB) Adapted from Ryff's Scales of Psychological Wellbeing (Ryff, 1989; short form) [10], comprising 18 items across six dimensions: Self-Acceptance, Positive Relations, Autonomy, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, and Personal Growth. Rated on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree). Total scores range from 18–108, with higher scores indicating greater wellbeing. The scale has established reliability ($\alpha = 0.78$ – 0.81 in Indian populations).

5. Procedure

Permission was obtained from school authorities and the District Education Office. Informed consent was obtained from students and their parents/guardians. Questionnaires were administered in a classroom setting with instructions provided in both Urdu and Gojri (orally). Data collection was completed over a period of four weeks during October–November 2025. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured.

6. Statistical Techniques

Descriptive statistics (Mean, SD, percentages)

Independent samples t-test (gender and location comparisons)

Pearson's product-moment correlation (relationship between barriers and wellbeing)

One-sample t-test (comparison against normative mean)

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Sample (N = 130)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	67	51.5
	Female	63	48.5
District	Anantnag	65	50.0
	Bandipora	65	50.0
Tribal Community	Gujjar	89	68.5
	Bakarwal	41	31.5
Class	9th–10th	72	55.4
	11th–12th	58	44.6
School Type	Government	85	65.4
	Private	45	34.6
Family Occupation	Pastoral/Nomadic	48	36.9
	Agriculture	52	40.0
	Daily Wage Labour	30	23.1
Parents' Education	Illiterate	64	49.2
	Primary Level	38	29.2
	Secondary & Above	28	21.5

Table 2: Dimension-Wise Mean Scores on Socio-Cultural Barriers Scale (N = 130)

Dimension	No. of Items	Max Score	Mean	SD	Mean %
Language & Communication Barriers	6	30	23.42	3.87	78.1
Economic & Livelihood Barriers	6	30	22.18	4.21	73.9
Gender & Cultural Norms	6	30	20.65	4.56	68.8
Migratory Lifestyle & Access	6	30	24.31	3.52	81.0
Curricular & Institutional Disconnect	6	30	21.74	4.08	72.5
Overall Barriers	30	150	112.30	14.62	74.9

Migratory lifestyle and access barriers scored highest (M = 24.31, 81.0%), followed by language and communication barriers (M = 23.42, 78.1%). Gender and cultural norms, while still substantial, scored relatively lowest among the

five dimensions (M = 20.65, 68.8%). The overall mean score of 112.30 out of 150 (74.9%) indicates that tribal students in both districts perceive a high level of socio-cultural barriers to inclusive education.

Table 3: Level of Perceived Socio-Cultural Barriers (N = 130)

Level of Barriers	Score Range	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low	30–70	11	8.5
Moderate	71–110	42	32.3
High	111–150	77	59.2
Total		130	100

A majority of tribal students (59.2%) perceived high socio-cultural barriers, and only 8.5% reported low barriers. This confirms H₁.

Table 4: Level of Psychological Wellbeing (N = 130)

Level	Score Range	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Low Wellbeing	18–42	38	29.2
Moderate Wellbeing	43–72	68	52.3
High Wellbeing	73–108	24	18.5
Total		130	100

The majority (52.3%) of tribal students reported moderate psychological wellbeing, while 29.2% reported low wellbeing. Only 18.5% fell in the high wellbeing category.

Table 5: One-Sample t-Test for Psychological Wellbeing Against Normative Mean (N = 130)

Variable	Sample Mean	SD	Normative Mean	t-value	df	p-value
Psychological Wellbeing	54.87	14.23	63.00	-6.51	129	< 0.01**

**p < 0.01 (Significant)

The mean psychological wellbeing score of tribal students (M = 54.87) was significantly below the normative mean of 63.00 (the established Indian mean for Ryff's short-form

scale). This confirms H₂ — tribal students in Kashmir report significantly lower psychological wellbeing than the normative population.

Table 6: Correlation between Socio-Cultural Barriers and Psychological Wellbeing (N = 130)

Variables	r-value	p-value	Result
Socio-Cultural Barriers × Psychological Wellbeing	-0.61	< 0.01**	Significant Negative Correlation

A moderately strong negative correlation (r = -0.61, p < 0.01) was found between perceived socio-cultural barriers and psychological wellbeing. This confirms H₃ — as

perceived barriers increase, psychological wellbeing decreases.

Table 7: Dimension-Wise Correlation of Barriers with Psychological Wellbeing (N = 130)

Barrier Dimension	r-value	p-value
Language & Communication Barriers	-0.52	< 0.01**
Economic & Livelihood Barriers	-0.58	< 0.01**
Gender & Cultural Norms	-0.47	< 0.01**
Migratory Lifestyle & Access	-0.55	< 0.01**
Curricular & Institutional Disconnect	-0.49	< 0.01**

All five barrier dimensions were significantly and negatively correlated with psychological wellbeing. Economic and livelihood barriers showed the strongest

negative relationship (r = -0.58), followed by migratory lifestyle and access (r = -0.55).

Table 8: Gender-Wise Comparison of Socio-Cultural Barriers and Psychological Wellbeing

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Socio-Cultural Barriers	Male	67	108.45	14.18	-3.24	< 0.01**
	Female	63	116.39	13.87		
Psychological Wellbeing	Male	67	57.92	13.56	2.68	< 0.01**
	Female	63	51.62	14.41		

Female tribal students perceived significantly higher socio-cultural barriers (M = 116.39) than males (M = 108.45), t = -3.24, p < 0.01. Correspondingly, female students reported significantly lower psychological wellbeing (M = 51.62) compared to males (M = 57.92), t = 2.68, p < 0.01. This is

consistent with literature documenting severe gender-based restrictions and lower female literacy among J&K tribal communities, where only 25.5% of Scheduled Tribe women were literate according to Census 2011.

Table 9: Location-Wise Comparison (Rural Settled vs. Remote/Migratory)

Variable	Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Socio-Cultural Barriers	Rural Settled	82	108.27	14.35	4.18	< 0.01**
	Remote/Migratory	48	119.18	12.41		
Psychological Wellbeing	Rural Settled	82	57.68	13.82	3.45	< 0.01**
	Remote/Migratory	48	50.07	13.91		

Students from remote/migratory backgrounds perceived significantly greater socio-cultural barriers (M = 119.18) than those from rural settled areas (M = 108.27), t = -4.18, p < 0.01. They also reported significantly lower

psychological wellbeing (M = 50.07 vs. 57.68), t = 3.45, p < 0.01. This reflects the documented disruption of education caused by seasonal migration among Bakarwal families.

Table 10: District-Wise Comparison

Variable	District	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Socio-Cultural Barriers	Anantnag	65	113.86	14.27	1.23	> 0.05 (NS)
	Bandipora	65	110.74	14.94		
Psychological Wellbeing	Anantnag	65	53.91	14.48	-0.84	> 0.05 (NS)
	Bandipora	65	55.83	13.97		

No significant difference was found between the two districts on either variable, indicating that socio-cultural

barriers and their psychological toll are consistent across tribal populations in different parts of the Kashmir valley.

Table 11: Item-Wise Analysis — Top 5 Barrier Items (Ranked by Mean Score)

Rank	Item	Dimension	Mean	SD
1	"Our family migrates seasonally, which disrupts my schooling"	Migratory Lifestyle	4.38	0.79
2	"Teaching in school is in a language I don't fully understand"	Language	4.24	0.85
3	"My family cannot afford school-related expenses"	Economic	4.19	0.91
4	"The school curriculum does not reflect our culture or traditions"	Curricular Disconnect	4.12	0.88
5	"Girls in my community are discouraged from attending school after a certain age"	Gender & Cultural	4.05	1.02

Table 12: Dimension-Wise Mean Scores on Psychological Wellbeing Scale (N = 130)

Dimension	No. of Items	Max Score	Mean	SD	Mean %
Self-Acceptance	3	18	9.24	2.87	51.3
Positive Relations	3	18	10.12	2.64	56.2
Autonomy	3	18	8.67	3.01	48.2
Environmental Mastery	3	18	8.93	2.78	49.6
Purpose in Life	3	18	9.45	2.91	52.5
Personal Growth	3	18	8.46	3.14	47.0
Overall PWB	18	108	54.87	14.23	50.8

All dimensions of psychological wellbeing scored below 60% of the maximum. Personal Growth (47.0%) and Autonomy (48.2%) scored lowest, reflecting the constrained developmental opportunities available to tribal students. Positive Relations scored highest (56.2%), consistent with the strong communal and familial bonds characteristic of tribal cultures.

Discussion of Findings

The results present a coherent picture of interconnected barriers and diminished wellbeing among tribal students in Kashmir. The finding that 59.2% of students perceive high socio-cultural barriers aligns with Singh and Lone's (2025) [13] documentation of inadequate infrastructure, migration disruption, and language barriers in Shopian district. The dominance of migratory lifestyle barriers (81.0%) reflects a reality unique to pastoral tribal communities — the biannual transhumance that disrupts school attendance for weeks or months at a time, creating what researchers have called "learning discontinuity."

The significant negative correlation between barriers and wellbeing ($r = -0.61$) extends findings from non-Kashmiri contexts. Suvera (2013) and Kalim and Prasad (2025) [5, 15] both documented lower psychological wellbeing among tribal compared to non-tribal students, but neither examined the specific mechanism through which barriers operate. The present finding suggests that perceived exclusion from education is not merely an access problem but a psychological one — students who feel their language is ignored, their culture invisible, and their lifestyle incompatible with schooling internalize these experiences as threats to autonomy, self-acceptance, and personal growth. The gender disparity merits particular attention. Female tribal students perceived significantly higher barriers and lower wellbeing, consistent with Wani and Majid's (2024) [18] finding that conservative norms severely limit female educational attainment among Gujjars in Budgam. In patriarchal tribal societies, girls face compound disadvantage — they are pulled from school earlier than boys, bear greater domestic responsibilities, and encounter stronger social resistance to education, particularly at the secondary level.

The absence of district-wise differences suggests that these barriers are structural and systemic rather than localized. Whether in Anantnag or Bandipora, tribal students face a fundamentally similar exclusionary architecture rooted in

policy design, curricular philosophy, and institutional indifference to tribal realities.

Conclusion

This study establishes that tribal students in Kashmir face pervasive socio-cultural barriers to inclusive education, with migratory lifestyle disruptions, language mismatch, and economic deprivation being the most salient. These barriers are significantly and negatively associated with psychological wellbeing, with female students and those from remote/migratory settings being disproportionately affected. The data confirm that inclusive education for tribal communities in Kashmir remains a policy aspiration rather than a lived reality — the systemic failure to accommodate tribal life patterns, languages, and knowledge systems within formal schooling constitutes a form of structural exclusion that carries measurable psychological costs.

Recommendations

- **Mobile and Seasonal Schools:** Establish mobile school units that travel with migratory Bakarwal and Gujjar families during transhumance seasons, ensuring continuity of education. Seasonal school calendars should be adapted to align with migration patterns.
- **Mother-Tongue Instruction:** Introduce Gojri as a medium of instruction at the primary level and as a supported language at secondary levels, consistent with the NEP 2020's emphasis on multilingual education.
- **Culturally Responsive Curriculum:** Integrate tribal cultural heritage, local ecological knowledge, and community narratives into textbooks and pedagogical materials, moving from assimilation to genuine inclusion.
- **Gender-Specific Interventions:** Deploy female teachers and community mobilizers in tribal areas, establish girls' hostels near secondary schools, and conduct sustained awareness campaigns targeting parental attitudes toward girls' education.
- **Psycho-Social Support Services:** Station trained school counsellors in tribal-area schools to provide regular psychological support, stress management, and resilience-building programmes for tribal students.

- **Teacher Sensitization:** Mandate cultural competency training for all teachers posted in tribal areas, covering tribal customs, communication norms, and inclusive pedagogical strategies.
- **Economic Support Enhancement:** Expand scholarship coverage, provide free transportation, and ensure timely disbursement of stipends under existing tribal welfare schemes to reduce economic barriers.
- **Community Engagement:** Establish School Management Committees with substantive tribal representation and involve tribal elders in educational planning and monitoring.

Limitations of the Study

- The sample was limited to two districts; findings may not generalize to all tribal communities across J&K.
- Self-report measures are susceptible to social desirability bias.
- The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference about the relationship between barriers and wellbeing.
- Students who had already dropped out — arguably the most severely affected — were not captured by this school-based sample.

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