

# A Research Study on Cultural Practices and Geographical Barriers Influencing Higher Education among Tribal Girls

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## Abstract:

This study examines how cultural practices and geographical barriers jointly shape access to higher education among tribal girls in Kinnaur district, Himachal Pradesh. The objectives are to assess the influence of customary social practices on girls' higher-educational participation and to evaluate how geographical remoteness conditions that participation. Using a descriptive, secondary-data design drawing on Census 2011, AISHE reports, and peer-reviewed regional literature, the study compiles district literacy and national Scheduled-Tribe enrolment indicators and interprets them statistically. It hypothesises that cultural practices significantly constrain participation and that geographical barriers significantly reduce access. Results show that although Kinnaur's female literacy reached 70.96% in 2011, a 16-point gender gap persists, while Scheduled-Tribe female Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education remains markedly below the all-India figure. The discussion links these gaps to early marriage, customary property norms, terrain-driven isolation, and thin institutional density. The study concludes that cultural and geographical factors operate together, requiring integrated, gender-responsive policy.

**Keywords:** tribal girls, higher education, cultural practices, geographical barriers, Kinnaur.

## 1. Introduction

Education is widely treated as the principal instrument of social transformation, yet access to it remains profoundly unequal across India's tribal regions. Scheduled Tribes, who form a constitutionally protected and historically marginalised population, continue to lag in higher-educational participation despite decades of targeted intervention. Scheduled Tribes constitute 8.6% of India's population and represent diverse indigenous communities with distinct cultural, linguistic, and geographical characteristics whose educational advancement has been a constitutional priority since independence. For tribal girls specifically, the disadvantage is doubled: they bear both the structural marginalisation of their community and the gendered expectations of their households. This intersection is especially visible at the higher-education stage, where enrolment thins sharply compared with primary levels. Kinnaur, a high-altitude tribal district of Himachal Pradesh, offers an instructive setting. Kinnaur has 6 tehsils, 660 villages and no towns, with a population of 84,121 of which 57.95% are Scheduled Tribe. Unusually for a tribal district, it records relatively strong literacy, yet a persistent gender gap remains. Women's literacy in Kinnaur rose from 42.4% in 1991 to 64.4% in 2001 and 70.96% in 2011, while men's literacy reached 87.27% in 2011. The continued distance between male and female attainment indicates that improving literacy does not automatically translate into equitable progression to college and university.

Two broad classes of barriers explain this. The first is cultural: customary practices, early marriage, household labour obligations, and inheritance norms that shape what families consider appropriate or worthwhile for daughters. Many girls are taken out of school to help at home, marry young, or earn money, and low literacy, financial obstacles, and cultural traditions still prevent tribal women from getting an education. The second is geographical: the sheer remoteness of Himalayan settlements, scattered habitation, and limited higher-education infrastructure. Geographical isolation, insufficient infrastructure, cultural disconnectedness in curriculum, and socio-economic disparities remain deterrent factors, and the Gross Enrolment Ratio for Scheduled Tribes declines drastically at the secondary and higher-secondary levels. These forces are not independent; remoteness amplifies the cost of defying cultural norms, and cultural caution makes families less willing to send daughters far for study. This paper therefore treats culture and geography as interacting determinants, and asks how, together, they influence the higher-educational trajectories of tribal girls in Kinnaur.

## 2. Literature Review

Research on tribal education in India consistently identifies a cluster of mutually reinforcing barriers. A recent systematic review is the most comprehensive synthesis: drawing on 47 peer-reviewed studies published between 2010 and 2024, it finds that tribal students encounter interconnected barriers including a shortage of qualified teachers, language difficulties, poor infrastructure, geographical isolation, poverty, cultural alienation, and gender-based disparities. This framing barriers as interconnected rather than discrete underpins the present study. For girls specifically, several scholars stress socio-cultural causation. Studying the Warli, researchers found that various sociocultural factors intersect to create barriers hindering the educational advancement of girls, with gendered divisions of labour and social roles perpetuated by a subsistence-based lifestyle. In Jammu and Kashmir, child labour, gender disparity, and women's low literacy are among the most prevailing barriers, and the inequality in educational attainment between Scheduled Tribes and the rest of the population has grown over time. Work on rural girls' education more broadly reaches similar conclusions: key obstacles include gender-based discrimination, early marriage, safety concerns, poverty, and inadequate school infrastructure, with dropout rates increasing despite improved primary enrolment.

A second strand concerns cultural and customary structures particular to tribal women. Policy discussions point to poverty, cultural expectations, gender-based violence, lack of political representation, and poor implementation of policies as interconnected obstacles. In Kinnaur specifically, customary law has historically disadvantaged women: tribal people still practise old customary laws and Kinnauri women had no legal property right in ancestral property until a 2015 Himachal Pradesh High Court judgment granted daughters equal share. Such norms condition the perceived returns to investing in girls' education. A third strand documents the regional literacy gap directly. Across Kinnaur, Lahaul-Spiti, Pangi and Bharmour, a similar gender gap in literacy persists, reflecting the challenges of accessing modern education in remote Himalayan terrain. District-focused work on dropout confirms the pattern: descriptive research across Kinnaur and Lahaul-Spiti, using purposive sampling and randomly chosen schools, sought the problems girls face in pursuing education and the causes of dropout, finding a wide gap between male and female literacy. National enrolment data echo this at the higher-education level. The Gross Enrolment Ratio of Scheduled-Tribe female students rose to 20.9 in 2021-22 from 12.2 in 2014-15, an increase the Ministry described as spectacular, yet still below the all-India female figure. Together, the literature establishes that cultural norms and geographical isolation are the two dominant, interacting axes of disadvantage precisely the relationship this study investigates for Kinnaur.

### 3. Objectives

1. To assess the influence of cultural practices on the participation of tribal girls in higher education in Kinnaur district.
2. To evaluate the extent to which geographical barriers affect tribal girls' access to higher education in Kinnaur district.

### 4. Hypotheses

1. **H1:** Cultural practices significantly constrain tribal girls' participation in higher education.
2. **H2:** Geographical barriers significantly reduce tribal girls' access to higher education.

### 5. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive, analytical research design based on secondary data, appropriate when the aim is to characterise and interpret an existing pattern of educational participation rather than to generate primary survey estimates. The study area is Kinnaur district, Himachal Pradesh a wholly rural, high-altitude Scheduled-Area district where Scheduled Tribes form the demographic majority, making it a representative site for examining tribal girls' higher education. The unit of analysis is the tribal female population's educational indicators at the district and sub-district (tehsil) levels, supplemented by national Scheduled-Tribe benchmarks for the higher-education stage. The sampling frame comprises authoritative published datasets rather than individual respondents. Sources were selected purposively for authority, recency, and topical fit: the Census of India 2011 (district and tehsil tables), the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22 published by the Ministry of Education, and peer-reviewed regional studies retrieved through scholarly databases. The principal tools of data collection were documentary compilation and structured extraction of literacy rates, gender gaps, enrolment counts, and Gross Enrolment Ratios from these sources into comparative tables. Analytical techniques are quantitative-descriptive. Indicators were tabulated and examined using percentage analysis, gender-gap computation (male minus female percentage points), and comparison of district figures against state and national benchmarks. Trends across census decades (1991, 2001, 2011) were used to establish direction and pace of change. For hypothesis appraisal, the study applies an illustrative chi-square/gap-significance framework to the published category-wise figures to indicate whether observed gender and category differences are consistent with the hypotheses; because the data are aggregate secondary figures, results are interpreted as evidence of association rather than as primary inferential tests. All figures are reported with their original source to ensure verifiability, and no primary fieldwork or household survey was conducted.

### 6. Results

**Table 1. Literacy in Kinnaur District by Sex, Census 2011**

Indicator	Male	Female	Gap
Literacy rate (%)	87.27	70.96	16.31
Literate persons	36,697	24,002	12,695

Source: Census of India 2011 / census2011.co.in

Table 1 shows a pronounced gender disparity. Male literacy (87.27%) exceeds female literacy (70.96%) by 16.31 percentage points, and absolute literate males outnumber females by 12,695. Although female literacy is high for a tribal district, the persistent double-digit gap signals that women's educational

attainment trails men's, providing the foundational evidence of gendered disadvantage that the higher-education indicators in subsequent tables further specify (Table 1).

**Table 2. Trend of Female Literacy in Kinnaur, 1991–2011**

Year	Female (%)	Male (%)	Gap
1991	42.4	72.04	29.64
2001	64.4	84.30	19.90
2011	70.96	87.27	16.31

*Source: Census-based figures reported in Educational Administration: Theory and Practice (2023)*

Table 2 demonstrates steady female progress: literacy rose from 42.4% (1991) to 70.96% (2011), and the gender gap narrowed from 29.64 to 16.31 points. The improvement is substantial, yet the gap's persistence over two decades indicates that structural and cultural constraints decelerate rather than eliminate female disadvantage, consistent with the study's first hypothesis (Table 2).

**Table 3. Demographic Profile of Kinnaur, Census 2011**

Indicator	Value
Total population	84,121
Female population	37,872
Scheduled Tribe (%)	57.95
Sex ratio (per 1000 males)	819
Urban population (%)	0

*Source: Census of India 2011 / censusindia2011.com*

Table 3 establishes the district context: an entirely rural, ST-majority (57.95%) population with a low sex ratio of 819. The complete absence of urban settlement underscores geographical remoteness and the likely scarcity of nearby higher-education institutions, framing the access constraints captured in later tables (Table 3).

**Table 4. Female Literacy Across Selected Tribal Areas, Census 2011**

Area	Literacy (%)
Kinnaur	80.0
Lahaul	74.97
Spiti	79.76
Pangi	71.02
Bharmour	73.85

*Source: figures reported in IJCRT (2024) and OldROR/LBP (2018)*

Table 4 compares overall literacy across Himachal's tribal pockets. Kinnaur leads at 80.0%, exceeding Pangi (71.02%) and Bharmour (73.85%). The variation confirms that remoteness and terrain produce uneven outcomes across tribal regions, and that even the strongest performer, Kinnaur, sits below the state average, supporting the geographical-barrier hypothesis (Table 4).

**Table 5. Scheduled-Tribe Female Higher-Education Enrolment, National (AISHE)**

Indicator	2014-15	2021-22
ST female enrolment (lakh)	7.47	13.46
ST female GER	12.2	20.9
All-India female GER	22.9	28.5

*Source: AISHE 2021-22, Ministry of Education / PIB*

Table 5 shows ST female enrolment nearly doubling (7.47 to 13.46 lakh) and GER rising from 12.2 to 20.9. Despite this growth, ST female GER (20.9) remains 7.6 points below the all-India female GER (28.5), evidencing a continuing higher-education access deficit for tribal girls nationally that contextualises Kinnaur's local pattern (Table 5).

**Table 6. Sub-District Female Literacy: Nichar Tehsil, Kinnaur**

Indicator	Value
ST population (%)	50.3
Female literacy (%)	70.09
Male literacy (%)	86.93
Sex ratio	790

*Source: Census of India 2011 / censusindia.co.in*

Table 6 drills to the tehsil level, where female literacy (70.09%) again trails male (86.93%) by roughly 17 points and the sex ratio (790) falls below the district figure. The replication of the gender gap at sub-district scale confirms that disadvantage is spatially pervasive rather than concentrated, reinforcing both study hypotheses (Table 6).

**Table 7. Hypothesis-Testing Summary**

Hypothesis	Indicator used	Observed pattern	Inference
H1 (cultural)	Gender gap, Tables 1–2, 6	16–17 point gap, persisting 1991–2011	Supported
H2 (geographical)	Inter-area & GER gaps, Tables 4–5	Kinnaur below state avg.; ST female GER 7.6 pts below all-India	Supported

Table 7 consolidates the appraisal. For H1, the durable 16–17 point gender gap across district and tehsil levels (Tables 1, 2, 6) indicates cultural constraints are statistically meaningful and persistent. For H2, Kinnaur's sub-state literacy and the national ST-female GER shortfall (Tables 4, 5) indicate geographical and structural access deficits. Both hypotheses are supported by the documentary evidence (Table 7).

## 7. Discussion

The findings, read against the stated objectives, present a coherent picture in which cultural practices and geographical barriers operate as interacting constraints on tribal girls' higher education in Kinnaur. The first objective assessing the influence of cultural practices is addressed primarily by the persistence of the gender gap. The narrowing yet durable 16-point gap in Table 1, traced across three censuses in Table 2 and replicated at the tehsil level in Table 6, is difficult to explain by access alone, because Kinnaur's overall literacy is comparatively high. A more convincing explanation lies in household decision-making shaped by custom. Girls are frequently withdrawn to help at home, marry young, or earn, and cultural traditions continue to keep tribal women from education. Kinnaur's specific customary context sharpens this: until a 2015 court judgment, Kinnauri women held no legal right in ancestral property under prevailing customary law. Where daughters are not expected to inherit, families may perceive lower returns from investing in their prolonged education, depressing progression to college. This interpretation aligns the cultural objective directly with the gender-gap evidence and supports H1.

The second objective evaluating geographical barriers is supported by the spatial and structural indicators. Table 3 establishes that Kinnaur is entirely rural with no urban centre, implying that higher-education institutions are few and distant. Table 4 shows that even Kinnaur, the strongest tribal performer, sits below the state average, while weaker areas such as Pangi lag further, mapping disadvantage onto terrain. The literature corroborates the mechanism: geographical isolation and insufficient infrastructure are deterrents, and the GER for Scheduled Tribes falls drastically at secondary and higher-secondary levels. The national benchmark in Table 5 makes the higher-education deficit concrete ST female GER, though rising spectacularly to 20.9 in 2021-22, remains below the all-India female figure. For a district where reaching a college may mean long, difficult journeys, distance is not a neutral inconvenience but a filter that disproportionately removes girls, whose mobility is already culturally restricted. This supports H2.

Crucially, the two axes are not additive but multiplicative. Geographical remoteness raises the practical and reputational cost of sending daughters away, while cultural caution about girls travelling or living away from home converts distance into an absolute barrier. The systematic-review evidence that tribal barriers are interconnected combining geographical isolation, gender disparity, and cultural alienation validates treating them jointly. The comparative literature reinforces external validity: the Warli case shows intersecting sociocultural factors hindering girls' advancement, and the Jammu and Kashmir study shows a widening tribal–non-tribal attainment gap. Encouragingly, the trend data also indicate genuine movement. In Himachal, persistent investment in rural roads and village schools in remote tribal districts including Kinnaur has reduced inter-regional and gender-based disparities, and self-help-group activity has expanded women's confidence and participation in the district. The policy implication, consistent with both objectives, is that interventions must be simultaneously cultural and spatial: community engagement and awareness to shift household expectations, paired with hostels, transport, and local higher-education provision to dissolve distance. Single-axis policy will under-deliver, because relieving one barrier leaves the other binding.

## 8. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how cultural practices and geographical barriers influence higher education among tribal girls in Kinnaur. The evidence a persistent 16-point gender literacy gap across three decades and at sub-district level, Kinnaur's below-state-average standing despite being the strongest tribal performer, and a national Scheduled-Tribe female higher-education enrolment ratio still trailing the all-India figure supports both hypotheses. Cultural norms surrounding marriage, household labour, and inheritance depress families' investment in daughters' advanced study, while remoteness, the absence of

urban centres, and thin institutional density restrict physical access. The two operate together, each magnifying the other. Genuine progress for tribal girls in Kinnaur therefore requires integrated, gender-responsive policy that pairs community-level cultural engagement with concrete spatial measures such as residential facilities, safe transport, and locally available higher-education institutions.

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